

ANNA'S GAME

When your social media company defies the government, it doesn't matter how you play the game, because winning is everything

A Silicon Valley Mystery
by
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The Silicon Valley Trilogy by Peter Mackeonis

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For everyone who believed in Democracy

Forward

It wasn't always the case that Amrit's home was a squalid room in San Francisco's Tenderloin. Five years earlier, he and his college buddy, Adam Eisenberg, had founded what quickly became a billion-member social network, and, as a member of Silicon Valley's elite he'd moved his family into an exclusive Woodside estate.

Amrit's world of privilege collapsed three years ago when, having destroyed the company's media lab during a night of cocaine-fueled programming, his buddy, Adam, instead of agreeing with the underwriters of ZEN's pending IPO that Amrit be sent to counseling, he demanded that Amrit be fired.

Now, thanks to the few dollars that he makes stocking shelves in Mrs. Banerjee's neighborhood convenience store Amrit's life slips by in a marijuana and vodka haze, and ZEN's OneWorld network has climbed to two-billion-members.

Until, that is, we begin **Anna's Game...**

Chapter I

The Mission

A sock cap, grubby shorts and a torn sweatshirt defined Amrit's place in San Francisco society, just as much as his self-medicating with drugs and rot-gut alcohol defined his state of mind. His world was bordered by his run-down room, a medical pot shop and his sporadic evening shifts, stocking shelves at the corner grocery store. His meager existence was made possible by the sympathetic store owner who paid him whenever he turned up, which, in turn, was dependent on whether he had managed to apply just the right measure of vodka to his marijuana intake.

It was a misty Friday evening when Amrit paused outside the doorway of ZEN Corporation's smart South Van Ness co-op conversion, to light up a spliff. As he took a deep intake of breath to feel the full effect of what had been not feeling so effective lately, the building's security guard, who had *JAMES* embroidered on his cap, and carried a scanner that was cloud-linked to the nation's criminal bio-metric database, appeared, and, in a soothing, but firm voice asked, "Sir, please stand quite still for the scan process, as I should warn you that any attempt to move or look away will result in my having to restrain you."

The unaware Amrit kept walking, until, releasing a primal scream, he fell to the sidewalk racked in pain, as if every nerve in his body felt exposed to the elements.

James strode over and scanned the face of his now immobilized loiterer. "I'm sorry Dr. Kahn, but you, of all people, should have followed my instructions." A brief pause was followed by just the right amount of concern. "Are you hurt? Would you like me to call someone?"

There was no response from Amrit who was still writhing in pain.

"But why did you resist? You know that I'm authorized by ZEN to use immobilizing force. You don't look very well. I can have help here in minutes, if you need it?"

"No, thank you, I must go," replied a groggy Amrit and using the wall to steady himself, he stood and moved slowly along the sidewalk.

As the fifty-thousand volt electrical charge drained mercilessly from Amrit's body, the chemical reactions in his brain parsed his last two years of existence, and he shuddered as he recalled this extended period of self-abuse, and a dim memory recalled why the security guard had addressed him personally. He had once been known as the co-founder of ZEN Software Corporation.

Amrit drank less and lit up less in the days that followed his altercation with James, and, now, often awoke distraught and sweat-sodden from nightmares that terrorized his fitful sleep. His days were not much better; his cheap room and the walk to and from work, past the urine-soaked doorways, now deeply disturbed him, and the drunks that he had trouble remembering, but who offered him a share from their bottles made him uneasy. A deep feeling of shame gestated within him; had he really, when desperately lonely, and at other times simply needing to release animal passions, exchanged alcohol for sex with some of the sad and desperate prostitutes that he could no longer make eye contact with? Now aware of what he had become, he questioned, as to whether he had the mental

resources to fight his way back to the life that he had lost years before. But, he would try. The oily knit cap discarded and now shaving daily, he purchased some better clothes at the Salvation Army, and took them to the launderette when they got dirty. When his budget allowed, he ate fresh fruit and avoided McDonald's and Burger King, and, as days turned into weeks, he began to once again recognize the human being staring back at him, out of the cracked communal bathroom mirror.

It did not take long for his employer, Mrs. Banerjee, to notice the change in his personality. A traditional woman, whose colorful saris further brightened her always cheerful demeanor, she had never before asked him where he came from and was surprised to find out that their families, although from different castes, were from the same region in India. He told her how his merchant-class family was able to afford to send him to an American university: her family, having scraped together the airfare, and outstaying their visitor's visas, had opened the corner store in the rundown Mission District. When he started to explain in detail about how he and a friend had, some years earlier, started a big data technology marketing company, she didn't pretend to understand, but did appreciate his suggesting better ways of stocking the shelves to get some of her more profitable items noticed. And, as he reorganized her store, week by week, her sales grew.

One evening, as he worked, she could not resist any longer asking him the obvious question, "I am very grateful for your help, Amrit, but why are you working here?" You are an educated man."

"I needed a job, and you were the only person who would hire me," he admitted truthfully. "You are quite right to wonder, but things might just change," and he tossed her a smile as he closed the door to walk home.

Amrit had accepted that he hadn't ended up at Mrs. Banerjee's overnight and he wasn't going to get out overnight either, but as his body started to normalize, so did pieces of his memory. Jumbled at first, then clearer, then far clearer, elements of anger rose, as he recalled how his life had ended the day he'd trashed the ZEN wing at Stanford University. Not one of the directors had cared that his cocaine rage was rooted in his quest to work twenty-four hour work days. They could have, should have, quietly arranged for him to go to Santa Barbara, for the industry-standard addiction cure, but the IPO was imminent and the underwriters dictated that to safeguard the offer price, they needed to immediately dispose of their rogue Technical Director, to avoid negative publicity. So, invoking the 'morals' clause in his employment contract, his friend and co-founder, Adam Eisenberg simply fired him. ZEN's Public Image Department erased him from Wikipedia and the Internet's digital history records, leaving him imprisoned solely on the no longer read pages of paper-published articles. Within days of American Express lowering his wife's spending limit, she moved out taking their 3-year old son with her. The next day he was evicted from the company's East Bay compound, and, moving into the Hyatt Regency, with what little he'd saved, he continued an OxyContin-cocaine cocktail habit that, having initially powered his creative juices, delivered him to San Francisco's Skid Row. What had once fueled his dusk-to-dawn programming sessions, and the success of ZEN, did to his life what it had already done to his nasal passages.

With the extra money that Mrs. Banerjee had been paying him for turning up more often, Amrit bought a battered, but functioning laptop at Goodwill, and, over a coffee at Starbucks, he used their free WiFi to get on the internet. Things had changed. Celebrity news now ruled. Fake news stories, that even the National Enquirer would

think twice about publishing, were everywhere; what had been fast was slowed down by ads and browser updates, which sometimes froze or restarted his laptop, before loading the web page that he wanted. Every web page he visited sent him a welcome email and then ads for days afterwards. His information highway of only a few years earlier was now nothing but a marketing environment, and, by his creating ZEN's original search engine, was he to blame? His internet had become a tangled mess. Did the search engine companies who had, by default, become the internet gate-keepers, and who reveled in their satellite-controlled yachts and license-plate-free cars, know or care, how flaky the infrastructure had become? Did they care that the information highway had been co-opted, as just a marketing web? Probably not, he thought, as it was unlikely to have happened accidentally. He found his newly realigned compass, from that of a drugged-out complacent, to an internet user frustrating, but it wasn't long before Mrs. Banerjee provided him with the final incentive to act.

“Look at this, just look at this!” Mrs. Banerjee said, as she waved a letter in his direction that had just arrived from her landlord. “They are doubling my rent! I can't afford this. Your internet people are responsible. They have come into this poor area and bought all the run-down properties. I see their huge private company buses that block traffic, and I have been forced into the street by them taking over the sidewalks with their scooters. They are all just so greedy! My cousin's restaurant, The Bengal Palace, was forced to close when the landlord tripled their rent; it's now an organic restaurant, and look at that ridiculous climbing wall in the park. I knew it was only a matter of time before my rent would be go up, and I would be forced out. Where can I go at my age?” She wailed, as she lowered herself onto her rickety stool to rest, after a burst of energy that Amrit had not witnessed from her before.

“I am extremely sorry for this.” Amrit said, as apologetically as he could. “I will do something. I do not know what that something will be, but I promise I will do something.” He felt that he needed to help the woman who had taken him in, and the community who had done nothing to him, except leave him in peace. A not yet fully formed idea of how he could help what had become his local community began to permeate his subconscious.

It was the morning of Valentine's Day, when Amrit signed up for a library card to access the internet, without having to buy a cup of coffee. Mrs. Banerjee's comments had made him curious as to how the technology companies, and especially ZEN, had become so wealthy, so fast. As he fondled the ergonomically contoured mouse, and his fingers glided gracefully over the full-size keyboard, he was not surprised to see how far Eisenberg's driven personality had taken the company. Two years earlier, they had just been a marketing data reseller, but since they launched his browser, they had become the global leader in data intelligence, with their subsidiaries influential in home control systems, robotics, satellites, ocean mapping, nuclear power stations and autonomous vehicles. There seemed to be no end to their infoweb and that was only what was openly known, although *Wikileaks* had suggested that one of ZEN's directors was a high ranking FBI official. Checking out the company officers, he was surprised to find Jon Djerk, the Valley's first-among-arrogant venture capitalists, still listed, as he was once reprimanded for using his Tesla registration plate, 'GotRich,' as his password.

Moving to a terminal that couldn't be overlooked, he logged on using 'GotRich' and delved into the program code that he had authored. With just a few keystrokes, he brought up his own design edit portal, no one had known to remove. His intellect had not slowed, despite the abuse that he had showered on it those last few months, and it was an

easy task to locate the program parameters that set customers ATM cash-drawing rights. He then opened the image recognition software code that would recognize the area's shabby and homeless. He then linked the systems. Roaming around the network, before logging off, he noticed that the company intranet, which should never be online, was accessible. A directory named 'ENDGAME' caught his eye, and he sent it to his laptop. He then added two back doors, one which was easy-to-find, that suggested a clumsy hacker had been lucky to access the system, and logged off.

Later that night, the internet, the radio and TV news channels reported how, starting at 8pm., ATM's in San Francisco's Mission District generously spat out \$20 bills, until the machines were empty. Labeled by the media as the work of the Valentine's Day 'Robin Hood,' the reports failed to mention that the \$20 bills had been debited to ZEN's operating account.

Chapter II

The Partnership

The ocean-going *Asphalia II* was moored for the night off the coast of Maui when Don McKesson texted his Chairman. As reassuring as it was supposed to be, "Some SF ATM's were hacked this evening, but it's in hand!" Adam wasn't so sure. The Director of China's Ministry of State Security was due to join them for a late dinner; surely he would ask just how secure their software was if it allowed such a dangerous prank, if that's what it was, and Adam had

no ready answers. But then again, he had not built a global powerhouse by being worried about ZEN's image: he paid people to take care of such things, and they hadn't failed him yet, so perhaps the answer was just a phone call away.

Adam's closet door drew back as he approached, allowing him to select one of fifty of his trade-mark black sea-island cotton roll-neck sweaters. As he prepared for his meeting, with yet another foreign government, he reassured himself that the bigger the company, and he controlled the world's largest, the bigger the target. And, no doubt, his people would make good PR out of Robin Hood's impromptu giving-away thousands of dollars to his home town's homeless.

“Hey Asphalia! Get me Don McKesson.” He told the ship's voice-activated information system, but the call went to voicemail, so he called out to his wife, Anna, to see what she could bring to the situation. “Don needs to get the full story before the press do, Anna, so let me know your take on the situation before you go and prepare for the Chinese delegation?”

Anna already understood that her input would be valued, which is why she had come to his private cabin. Adam was simply the best when it came to strategy; he assumed that the people that approached him wanted something, so he could pretty much set his own terms, but it was an extremely narcissistic attitude, and he never cared to understand others' motivations. She'd joined the company with her Communications degree from Wharton, and had enjoyed her highly paid job for almost two years before Adam asked her to become his PA. ZEN's M&A Director had commissioned her to prepare a pre-meeting report on a potential acquisition target, and she'd dug so far into the lives of the target's principals that it would have made the CIA proud; nothing had escaped her analytical mind and the resulting balance sheet of the subject's life experiences

and weaknesses meant that her cordial, but ruthless employer manipulated the purchase with extreme ease and had asked to meet the report's author, and, after half an hour, he knew she was a keeper. Within six months they were married.

Anna enjoyed her job as Robin to Adam's Batman, and they both knew that the dossier that she had prepared for their meeting with the Chinese, even down to their specific food and vintage wine preferences, would be made for an easy dinner. So, there was a good half hour for she and Adam to discuss how, or whether it was necessary, for ZEN to defuse the issue of the ATM's, but for that she had to understand the potential source of the San Francisco giveaway.

"I doubt that this was just a nuisance hack, Adam?" And she could tell from the creases that had spread across his forehead that this was also his impression. "How deep did they get into the system? Is it likely that anything else was compromised?"

"We don't know yet, but it's unlikely they got very far. Just some joker," but he did not sound convincing. "Our security is the best in the world. It's our own in-house system, so I doubt that whoever it was got past the ATM distribution system. That's why the take was so small."

Anna wasn't so sure. Certainly Adam knew how to hire the right people: the company hadn't built itself, but she had more insight into how the promises and actual delivery of systems differed, and how much vaporware made it into a deliverable. She knew how many technology leaders had feet of clay. Her father had been one of the industry pioneers in Italy, and the tales he told suggested that the technology business was generally business first and that technology, often, came a poor second. She heard that the technical director of the company that hired Andy Warhol to play with their revolutionary graphics computer

at its million dollar Kennedy Center launch, believed that home computers would never have more than 64k in RAM. After his company went to the wall, he ended up running the planet's largest anti-virus software company, that was, before it was bought by Adam, who fired him for incompetence.

She asked Adam again, and this time he looked at his watch – his nervous tick – now she too was concerned. But about what? They were personally worth over quarter of a trillion dollars, if she discounted the contribution that they had recently committed to charity, and they could talk to over a quarter of the world's population, with just the few strokes of a keyboard, so what could possibly worry him?

Perhaps she was misreading him. But then, she had noticed that he had changed starting around the time that he had his first 'meet and greet' with the Homeland Security people; he laughed less and frowned more. Small things at first; he hadn't liked her replacing the framed Johnny Unitas Super Bowl jersey hanging in their bedroom with a Modigliani - what she called real art, or using the sterling silver candelabras at evening mealtimes instead of the over-bright wall sconce lighting. At first she'd put this down as 'men's taste,' but she wasn't so sure.

“So what could they have accessed? I can't imagine there being anything sensitive on a public server?”

"As a rule, no. You know that our intranet is totally inaccessible, but....," he paused, and his eyes stared out of the cabin's main porthole that was overlaid with a Murano glass mermaid. “But we may have had some Homeland Security documents that should have been off-line.”

From Adam's unusual use of indecisive words, Anna could see that this was not something that was not going to be drawn out of him easily, so she requested Don again from the yacht's command system.

“How's the water out there in the Pacific?” Came the opening from the security chief.

“Not as hot as its about to get in Mountain View,” Adam joked, “Unless we can get in front of this hacking story. So tell me exactly what happened and what the bastards may have gotten away with?” Don was thankful for the humor in his chairman's voice, and knew that this was not going to turn into one of their now regular shouting matches.

“From what we can see, and you're not going to believe it, they came in using Djerk's 'GotRich' password,” he muttered, “stupid bastard,” under his breath, but the sensitive microphone broadcast it.

“Yes, he is,” responded Adam, “And when this call is over, I want you to personally block him from the system and then send him his letter of resignation to sign. So, let me ask again, what did we lose apart from a small amount of cash? Was any damage done, or any data stolen?” He shot a glance at Anna, who acknowledged his now growing impatience.

“Not as far as we can see. But whoever it was knew enough to jump some major hurdles, and there aren't many people who could have done it without downloading the programs and then coming back into upload a patch. This wasn't *Anonymous* or any of the regular actors. These people managed to make changes on the fly – and that means that they knew the programs in and out and sideways.”

Don had not been asked, and had not volunteered that the ENDGAME directory had been copied, or that he had already briefed Dauber at Homeland Security. There was no need to push the panic button. At least not until they received what was bound to be a ransom request; and even then, if the file is retrieved and the thief eliminated, it might never get pushed at all.”

“So, Don, tell me who qualifies to be on that list?”

“That's the point – no one does.”

“That can't be, Don. Call me back when you've got at least one candidate. Gotta go as my guests are close to being piped aboard,” and he decided that if Don was in the dark, his best bet would be to have Anna start tapping her contacts to see who, if anyone, was bragging about the hack.

Anna had not needed a list of potential candidates. What she didn't understand was why Amrit had waited two years before striking back. She been the one person in ZEN that had been against what led to his ultimate destruction, and it had been the one time that she hadn't been able to influence Adam to her way of thinking. She had ignored ZEN's 'staff couldn't date staff' rule, but she also suspected that Adam had been jealous of her going for drinks with Amrit – even though the meetings were innocent - and that if she'd have pushed any harder she too could have been let go. Today though, she was untouchable, and she'd do what she could to help the real victim before the authorities got to him. Whether he would want to hear from her, after she had turned on him in favor of ZEN, was a different matter.

Chapter III

Preaching to the Choir

One of the few known facts about Roger de Courcey was that Roger de Courcey was not his real name. It was possible, that he had been the London-born, James Nolan, when he first met with Amrit Kahn some years earlier, at a Microsoft marketing conference at the Sandy Lane resort on

Barbados, but it was not certain. He was not generally known to have been the homeless sixties hippy James Nolan, who, when not at a music festival, could be found 'guesting' on friends floors, or that he had been befriended, over salt beef sandwiches, by prostitutes in Phil Rabin's Nosh Bar in London's red light Soho district. Instead, Roger de Courcey was known to have had created a software marketing company that, at one time, licensed software to every personal computer company that had more than a five-percent market share. But that had been before the Internet spoiled things with free apps. More recently, along with his business had gone his ability to buy shirts from Jerymn Street, his bench-made shoes and his bespoke suits from Saville Row, and his supply of favorite cheeses and game pies from Paxton & Whitfield. If known, these few facts would have told the people that rented his talents, that, while his body was in America his soul was still in London, and his mind valued the individual.

That day he was in Nevada, and he had been hired by the FBI. Roger had just stepped up to the podium when the incoming text vibrated the phone in his pocket. He quickly glanced at it, then looked around the stark Las Vegas hotel conference room to see if he had any friends in the audience, but that was not the case. The room, in back of the gaming floor, enjoyed the addictive tinny din of the slot machines and generally hosted weddings and Bar Mitzvas. An over-the-top glass chandelier and a handful of palms in pots, unevenly sprinkled round the room, to add a touch of class, had failed. As had the temporary room dividers that were supposed to afford some privacy to the bored and restless audience of Vietnam vets, college kids and the suits, whose Lear jets sat gathering sand just a couple of miles away at McCarran International. Roger knew that he had just moments to engage his motley, invite-only audience in this cathedral to the Dollar, where Circus Circus's parking

lot once stood. Glancing down again at the text, before tapping the microphone to get the room's attention, he decided to drop the approved and paid-for talk, and wing it. "We all know that there have been way too many cases of both corporations and individuals stealing from internet consumers; some of us here have even taken part in such enterprises...."

1. There were a few hoots from the audience." "...but I've just been told, officially, that we have just experienced our first Robin Hood attack on a corporation, and, quite frankly, I'm surprised that it didn't happen years ago." A mild applause rippled through the room. "And, for those of who may be surprised by my comment, because I know many of you have no idea what came before the internet and smart-phones, I'd like to start with a short history lesson to explain why Robin Hood was inevitably going to happen, as a payback for the trashing of the Sixties dream."

Some groans and a few laughs suggested that his risky opening might just work. Some stopped tapping on keyboards, others put down their phones and a few stopped pretending to be asleep.

So he continued, "The Sixties was the greatest decade that the World had ever experienced. The decades of spiritual constipation that preceded two world wars that killed millions, suddenly blew away when four guys from Liverpool, England, woke everybody up with their music and attitude. A gray scale world suddenly turned to Technicolor and art and music became a way of life for everyone under twenty. In England, unlicensed offshore radio stations played music that made the establishments' blood boil; it was irreverent and noisy and encouraged outlandish behavior that was considered unacceptable. Millions of kids thought and moved in loosely structured herds as they listened to no one. And the feeling spread. Spiritualism and its music came from the East, and Ravi

Shankar taught George Harrison to play the sitar; and it was impossible to get away from the beautiful sweet smell of incense. In the US, over a million kids gathered in upstate New York to listen to music, smoke grass and make love. It looked like the beginning of the 'end of days' to anyone over thirty, and it freaked the establishment out so badly that they had no idea what to do. Ironically, their salvation came, not from censorship or prosecution, but from capitalism. The kids were having so much fun that they failed to notice that corporate advertisers and promoters were taking over the management and production of everything from their simple make-do clothes, to art, to music, to their movies. And the cash registers rang like they never had before. So, slowly, but effectively, the world became sterile again and the decade was over."

The room seemed to be enjoying the lesson, so he continued.

"However, with the arrival of the Seventies, the smell of incense was replaced by the smell of the greenback. Heroin and cocaine replaced the more gentle hash and less gentle acid. We could all still 'Rock On' the media told us, but the naive pleasures had morphed into the pursuit of Mammon. The small smoke-filled clubs like the *Whisky A Go Go* and *Marquee* now took second place to *Club 54*, premium scotch and the 'tops and tails' at the worlds' *Playboy Clubs*. The Sixties were over and done, and so was the innocence. But, hold on, we had credit cards, and we had glitz, and we had our beloved Fiorucci jeans; a wrist without a Cartier Tank watch belonged to an unfortunate; a wallet without a 'Les A' membership was beyond the pale, and, my friends, an unstoppable trajectory had begun. We had spawned globalism. Reagan, Thatcher, Bush, Clinton and all the others were to rebirth us into a world so full of expansions and contractions that has made Huxley's *Brave New World* seem like Dr. Seuss. Whatever dream the youth

had, had gone.”

He paused for effect.

“And NOW, this is where some of you enter - well, some of you anyway. Welcome to the Eighties, when IBM gave us personal computers; magically animated calculators with motherboards, operating systems, and TV-screen-type screens and Pong. The world went crazy; the boring wrote spreadsheets and sixteen-year-old kids made fortunes writing games for Atari and Commodore, and the cash flowed like it would never end. And, guess what? It didn't. It grew and it grew until in the mid-Nineties the internet came along. And, all the now middle-aged sixties kids, saw the second coming. The world of music, of art, of culture had returned, and, more importantly, had added instant global communication. And it all came wondrously through the telephone line.

Another pause

”BUT then *it* happened again. Another new breed of corporations, more avaricious than those that killed the Sixties, appeared to harness the internet. Thanks to the IPO's and fund-raising, Stanford, MIT and Berkeley, history repeated itself and with a vengeance. Fast forward to the likes of ZEN, and we now have the mindless and socially corrosive garbage pail that the internet has become. Not only is the information retrieved, prioritized, in favor of sponsors, but it's more often than not totally disassociated from the original search query. And to add insult to injury, all our searches, preferences, movements and purchases, are tracked and sold to any advertiser who can pay for it. And, because the technology has enabled the corporations that run our lives to live on the internet, our entire society is vulnerable to attacks and destruction; everything, from power stations to dams, to flight controllers, hospitals, banking and trading systems, tv and radio, and all the rest of what we need to survive, is networked and open to

anyone with greed or a grievance, or to a modern-day Robin Hood.“

“Fucking Luddite,” came an insult, then, “Go back to England!”

“This is the twenty first century,” came another voice came from the crowd.

“Yes it is, and I'm not suggesting that we turn off the internet, but we need to look at what it's turned into, or, very soon we are going to find out that information technology is not our friend. The technology that can anticipate what pizza toppings you'll order, based on your last five takeouts, or the company that chooses your books and scans your friends of friends' email accounts and social media pages, will also influence how you'll vote and whether you should be on a 'Do Not Fly List'. Societies are intrinsically tribes. Turf wars *will* break out, as will internecine struggles. I wonder if Hitler could have exterminated so many millions if an American corporation hadn't provided the Third Reich with punch card technology? And, that was over seventy-five years ago. As the airports around the world roll out facial-recognition software, as a substitute for passports, where does anyone, guilty until proven innocent, hide. Sure, Twitter tells us about events, but after the fact. Our masters have the tools to blur the lines that used to protect us; ask yourselves why are whistle-blowers called terrorists, to be jailed or hounded out of the country to hide in foreign embassies? As programmers, WE have a responsibility for the future, because we create it, and if we don't stop treating the consumers as children, by supporting search engines that don't search and offer nothing but amusing crap, while governments are doing, God knows what, under the cover of Homeland Security, someone is going to toss a serious rock into the machine. Thank you for listening.”

And some had, but the majority hadn't. Sure, a few

had cheered during the reference to corporations, but most had tuned out while they waited for next speaker, to take the microphone, an agent from the Secret Service, because that's who they were there to hear; to learn what jobs might be available in the gray area of Government.

But the FBI in the room hadn't ignored de Courcey's tirade; they hadn't paid him to call for a technical Jihad and deeply regretted meeting his up-front fifteen-thousand dollar fee.

As Roger left the podium, he noticed Amrit at the back of the room.

"It's been a while Roger, and I see that you're as self-indulgent as ever. How would you like a go at an encrypted file that might just be in line with the speech that you just delivered?"

"That's quite a welcome Amrit. What happened to, how are you, or how are the kids?"

"We both know that you have no children, and, by the look of you, you're perfectly fine."

"So, what's the file and where did it come from?"

"If I said ZEN, would you care?"

Roger nervously glanced around the room using one of the hideously ornate mirrors. Noticing a stubby memory stick in Amrit's hand, he feigned a late greeting to shake hands to palm the object. He smiled as he said, "No doubt this fell into your lap while you were doing some routine ATM maintenance. I *was* hoping that whoever did that, did so in support of the message I just gave, but it'll happen sooner or later, and I can't blame you. We all know how ZEN trashed you, so welcome back," and he wandered off in the direction of the slot machines to try some on-the-fly Java programming to pay for his evening to come.

It was late that night when Amrit received Roger's first text. "We're in" it started, continuing "It was easy

going, so they had not expected anyone to have access that was not authorized – and I see why. It's the marketing plan to end all marketing plans.”

Amrit was disappointed. He texted back, “I'm not interested in marketing plans. I had hoped for something more interesting.”

“Call this number from a payphone, as soon as you can,” and Roger texted Amrit a number attached to his disposable pay-as-you-go phone.

Amrit moved the conversation to the beer-soaked corner of his hotel's bar, where the landline hung, in a run-down motel at the end of the Strip.

Roger picked the conversation back up with, “You're wrong. It doesn't get any better than this, my friend. Your principals have made a pact with the Devil. They are set to police the world, and wait for this, with the aid of the respective governments, in exchange for the marketing rights.” And he went on to explain in detail how the global scheme would work.

By the time Roger had finished explaining, Amrit had a ambivalent appreciation for the project's title of **ENDGAME**.

He had helped create the system that would make the KGB, MOSSAD, the MI5 and the CIA, combined, look like the local cop on the beat. Somehow he had to get this information out, but he had no intention of living life on the run, or holed up in an embassy overseas. He thought of Anna, who had been a friend, or as much as she could be, when his life turned to crap, and she had gone on to marry Adam. He believed her to be both sensitive and sensible; surely she wouldn't be in favor of such a calamitous project. He would try to sound her out.

Anna was having no luck making the rounds of old friends, that just might have kept in contact with Amrit,

when he came in on call interrupt.

A drunk started playing one of the crazy-noisy slot machines not three feet away from the wall-phone, so Amrit had to should to be heard, "Hi Anna. It's been a while," and he let the words sink in before continuing, "If you recognize my voice, please don't say my name."

"You were the last person that I expected to hear from. As soon as I saw the first tweet I knew it was your work," were the first words out of Anna's mouth, and from her tone of voice Amrit felt almost relaxed. "I never had a chance to tell you that I felt terrible about what happened, but there was nothing that I could do once Adam had convinced the board to put the IPO first. What have you been doing all this time?"

Amrit just said that he had been ill, but had recovered and then he asked what she knew of ENDGAME.

"Nothing really, other than it's a marketing program that's been in beta test for a while. It's strange that you ask, because our Chinese government guests were keen to have a progress update, and, it surprised me that, instead of talking about it, which I would have expected Adam to do, he said that he'd get back to them by email. Why? What have you heard?"

"I've been told that it is more of an international policing program than a simple marketing plan. It's an analytical behavior system using information captured from literally all over the world - and I'm bothered about it, because, apart from it sounding totally anti-democratic, my code is involved."

"That's nonsense. We're a highly ethical company." Then her voice was more serious. "Who told you this? You know that rumors about ZEN are always being spread about just how terrible we've become. And this just sounds like another one of those."

"This one's real, and I have proof."

“So, you are saying that the company that Adam created from scratch is working for the US government?”

Amrit ignored that Anna completely overlooked the pivotal role that he had played in the company's success. “Not exactly. I don't think that you have got it yet. ENDGAME involves, not just our Government, but half the world. Who are you to have ZEN to spy on their citizens in exchange for the marketing rights to what they see and hear. This is incredibly dangerous and not just to democracy - what if inept subcontractors get involved? Remember a while back when inactive smart phones and high-end imported parked cars were catching fire? What if it wasn't the batteries at fault? What if it was down to security service hacks causing super-activity in the processors?”

Anna just took a deep breath.

“I'm going to need real proof of that before I believe any of this.”

“I can email you a summary on Homeland Security notepaper.”

“Thanks, but you have to be joking. If it's what you say it is then there's no way I want to be receiving email about it. We've been in the islands for meetings, but Adam has to fly back the day after tomorrow for a board meeting, and that means he'll be going surfing in Santa Cruz, with his buddies afterwards, so can you be in the city Thursday or Friday?”

“Where do you want to meet?”

Amrit knew that Anna shouldn't come to his place in the Mission District. The streets were crawling with ZEN's people refitting buildings and moving in equipment, for a new data center, and his new apartment wouldn't be ready. It would be safer to meet in China Town, where tech people seldom went, and he suggested 11 a.m. Friday, at a cafe they both knew.

As the call disconnected, Amrit wondered if Anna would turn up with the FBI.

Chapter IV

Time to Talk

From its humble beginnings, in 1848, North East San Francisco houses the largest population of Chinese outside of Asia and draws as many tourists as the Golden Gate Bridge; which is exactly why the Valley's techies have traditionally stayed away. All but completely destroyed by the 1906 earthquake, many of its over one-hundred-thousand residents are born, live and die in this sprawling ethnic bubble of restaurants, *mah jong* parlors, herbalists, grocery stores and temples. It is *the* place to visit in California if you're in the market for the unapproachable durian and thousand-year-old eggs or faux antique furniture, iffy jade, pearls, heroin and pick-pockets; unlike Tony Bennett, many a tourist has left with their hearts intact, but having left their wallets. An anachronism of the new world that the tech companies were creating: it was a place that their staff avoided like the plague. For the time being, anyway.

As Amrit approached Anna at *Cafe de la Presse's* sidewalk tables she smiled to see her old friend. She looked stunning in a beautifully tailored powder blue sundress and Amrit silently acknowledged that it highlighted her femininity and that she was even prettier than he remembered her. She surprised him by moving to kiss his cheek as he got up to greet her, and he wondered if this

simple action told him that there was a chance she was going to be responsive to what he was about to tell her. They spoke only briefly of what he had been through and throughout the conversation he could further tell from her body language and expressions that she was empathetic. He then spoke of Mrs. Banerjee and how the character of the Mission District was being systematically destroyed by the wealthy high-tech invaders, and she doubted his claim that the city's police forced the area's homeless and mentally ill people onto buses headed south to Santa Cruz, where the social services had larger budgets. Then, over the espressos, that completed their late breakfast, he asked her again what she knew of ENDGAME.

“It's as I said yesterday, it's just another marketing program. Perhaps the largest big data program that ZEN has handled, but you know how scalable our systems are, so it's not that remarkable. Why don't you tell me in detail what you've heard?”

Amrit's tone changed as he started to explain what he knew. “It's not as innocuous as you think, and I didn't help build the planet's largest information company just so it could bring in a bigger Big Brother in exchange for marketing rights. Adam has negotiated permission to link and monitor America's image, voice and biometric data systems in exchange for the exclusive data mining rights. The fee for this arrangement, or should I say the price we will all pay for this is that ZEN is to make this data available to the Government for free. ENDGAME is the subornation of our freedoms in exchange for whatever your advertisers want to show to us, whether it is of quality, dangerous, or simply doesn't work, as long as it is profitable. In simple words, ENDGAME will mean ultimate Government monitoring.”

Anna was stunned. “Come on, Amrit, You know that this is not who ZEN is, and definitely not who Adam is. Who

told you all this garbage?”

“It was all in the files that I found on your server.”

Anna's attitude hardened, “Stole, you mean?”

Amrit followed suit “No. I was the main architect - the underlying algorithms still show my copyright, so I reckon I had a right to view how it was to be prostituted.”

“So who else knows about this?”

“Friends, Anna. Just friends.”

“Wikileaks sort of friends? Enemies of the U.S sort of friends.?”

Amrit hesitated to answer. While he had noticed the sun dress, he hadn't noticed the Cartier watch and Chanel pumps, and he now wondered if she was still the balanced girl he knew.

“Isn't anyone who exposes a public danger a friend?”

“So tell the media, tell the press.”

Sure, the Washington Post published the Pentagon Papers, but don't count on anybody publishing **ENDGAME**, as these days they are all in the same bed. And even if they did, the public won't care. And as for the American people being warned, go rent the 70's movie **NETWORK**. The lead character, a news anchor, who sees the news turning into entertainment, convinces millions of viewers to go to their windows and shout, “I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore.” He becomes a cult hero, and so newsworthy that in the final scene, to boost his show's flagging ratings, the network has him assassinated during a live broadcast of his 'news show.' The playwright won an **OSCAR** by correctly predicting that the general public would accept entertainment as news. Today there's just too much fake news out there and whoever is behind **ENDGAME** would have their plan branded as fake within nanoseconds.

“But what if it is fake news that's just slanderous click-bait?”

Amrit handed Anna a memory stick. “Read the project through and then we'll talk again.” He then he took a flip phone out of his pocket. “If you want to talk again, this is the only way that you can get a hold of me.”

Anna's parting wasn't as friendly as her greeting, but then why would it be when her world was being threatened? Amrit ordered another espresso as he watched her walk through the China Town entrance gates.

SOMA, as the name suggests, is the area South of Market Street, and it takes in much of the run-down Mission District. The first sky cranes arrived in 2008. They came to turn what had been a low-rent and light commercial area into upscale housing for the Valley's programmers and metro-sexuals, and they have never left. High-priced corporate attorneys invoked Eminent Domain laws to demolish tenements and warehouses and whorehouses, to build sky scrapers with multi-million dollar penthouses that overlook the Bay's multi-million dollar views. And, thanks to ZEN, is where Amrit bought his new apartment.

Less than twenty-hours hours had passed before Anna used the flip phone.

This time Amrit suggested meeting at his friend's SOMA district apartment. The *American Beauty* building's seventy-five floors of glass and steel was the most expensive development in the city's history and it dwarfed the TransAmerica Building. Purchased fully-furnished, by a Dutch company registered in Andorra, the Bitcoin transaction was completely untraceable.

“Some place!” commented Anna, who had become blasé to visiting extravagant surroundings, so she thought the apartment must be owned by a billionaire pulling Amrit's strings. “You must have 'some' friends.”

Amrit let her comment go and cut to the chase.

“So, what do you think about ENDGAME?”

“I thought that it was wide ranging, but nothing that monitoring couldn't control, but I'm more interested in who owns this apartment. Is it your handler's?”

For the second time, Amrit ignored her snipe about his apartment, as it was not the right time to tell her that during his hack, he'd taken his back salary from ZEN in Bitcoin. He'd wanted to be paid in crypto-currency, so that what he took his back-salary in had greatly appreciated to become just under two billion dollars. Anna would have labeled him an opportunist and a thief, so he stayed focused on the issues. “So, ZEN being a pawn to the Secret Service, in exchange for the marketing rights, is OK?”

“As I said, if it also keeps us safe, I really think it's OK.” But Anna's voice wasn't as decisive as it could have been.

“And, a central database of combined medical records, tax filings, travel records, biometric data, credit information, voice prints, picture identity records and anything else that is harvested is also OK?”

“But why not, if...” But she couldn't finish her thought before Amrit started again.

“In China, jay walkers have their photos shown real-time on billboards at crossings to help persuade them not be repeat offenders. Now, extrapolate that into people in autonomous vehicles going about their normal life, being automatically rerouted to a police station, because they said something in their homes or to a friend over the phone that the authorities found threatening?”

“But couldn't that also put an end to drug smuggling and child prostitution and not an end to personal freedom?”

Amrit was frustrated that Anna was in such denial. “You sound like a member of the flat earth society. The people running the world don't care about such things. If

they did they would stop these evils over-night. ENDAME is a perfect circle. ZEN stock is owned by Sovereign funds, military contractors and multinationals; the very people that will benefit from controlling the world's population by both military and commercial products.”

Anna had found her voice. “Look Amrit, I know that we treated you badly, but you have to stop this insanity. I only met with you because I felt sorry for you, and thought that I could help you before you pulled any more stupid stunts like the ATM giveaway, but what you are suggesting is insane. It would mean that everyone would have to allow tracking devices in their homes and vehicles and that would never happen.”

Amrit answered in a somber voice, “Do you remember when the Government announced that they were taking away the TV broadcast air waves? Everyone had to purchase a digital converter box just to free watch TV. Well, that was just to see if they could. Sure people complained, but it went ahead anyway. Now, of course, everyone's smart TV's broadcast as well as receive. Do still think home monitoring is impossible?”

Anna had no answer.

So, Amrit continued, “Did you see who the signed ENDGAME'S Heads of Agreement?”

“No., I didn't get that far. Around fifty pages in, I assumed that this was a faked document, and that your handlers just made it some gray government organization.”

“It was as I told you yesterday - it was a UN Security Council document.” Replied Amrit.

“And did Don sign for ZEN? I've never really trusted him. He always seemed to be slippery.”

“It was signed by Adam!”

Anna was visibly shocked. “So you're telling me that this whole thing is real, and that everyone in a United Nations country is to be constantly data-mapped for

criminality or insurgency?”

“And, let's not forget shopping preferences, down to shirt, shoe or dress size.”

As the evening went on, Anna now curled up on the sofa, and, more comfortable in her surroundings, began to understand how, once this information was integrated into ZEN's MyWorld social media site, there would be no way of stopping it. And then, almost as an afterthought, she asked, “Do you have friends in Wikileaks?”

“Not Wikileaks, they're just publishers. We need diggers for this. I never thought it before, but now I believe that we are heading to a New World Order run by some faceless Deep State and that scares the shit out of me.”

“I can't fund anything of any magnitude without Adam noticing.”

“ZEN's going to pay for it. Where do you think that this apartment came from?” Amrit's brain flashed as he went back to the time that ZEN and Adam screwed him. “ZEN bought it for me... In Bitcoin... They just don't know yet ...and possibly never will. So, trust me, money is not a problem.”

Anna wasn't too sure about this anger streak that she had not noticed before in Amrit, even if it was justified.

“Okay, but when the time comes, I'm going to have to be pragmatic about my future.”

Amrit wasn't sure what Anna meant by that but he said, “Don't worry, I'll make sure that you come out OK.”

“So you are going to take on the whole world, literally, and you're going to make sure that I'm OK and not having to live the rest of my life hiding overseas in a foreign embassy?” She thought for a moment, laughed and then asked, “What've you got to drink around here?”

Amrit went over to his fridge and took out a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and two frosted glasses. “Will this do?”

It was 7 a.m. When Anna, clutching an espresso, drew the blinds. Her head a little thick from the champagne, she looked down through the floor to ceiling window to see ZEN's hydrofoil commuter ferry running early morning workers along the bay to the Mountain View campus.

As the window briefly changed to a mirror, she saw doubt flicker on the face of the woman at the top of the world. She now began to doubt that the internet was such a great value to society. She knew of the millions of fake news articles, the pornographic and violent videos and plain spam that had to be constantly weeded out from their platform; the editing done sometimes by computer algorithms, but mainly by humans. She doubted that the sorters couldn't help but be harmed by having to view the content. But she was beginning not to doubt her father, when he jokingly claimed that 'nothing good ever came out of America?'

But her doubts included a different form of doubt - indecisiveness.

What if, all that she had heard and read, was Amrit pulling a sophisticated ruse on her? Democracies can't act that way, even if they wanted to. Sure she knew the scope of volume of data scraped daily from all the sources. She had been with Adam when he cut the ribbon on ZEN's first hundred-acre solar-powered cloud in the Mojave Desert. But, collecting data was not the same as being able to parse it into useful information.

She wondered just how wise she had been secretly meeting the man who was trying to bring the world to a halt. And, her thoughts of danger *were* prescient, but not for her, and they were interrupted by the sound of a message on her cell. Thanks to a collision on Highway 17, Adam was still in Santa Cruz and asked if she would stand in for him at a meeting across town. She called an Uber, for the short ride to the company apartment, for a change of

clothes and where a limo would be waiting to take her to the Presidio for the 11 a.m. Meeting, and she let Amrit sleep on.

Chapter V

To VALHALLA

Fortified in 1776 against an attack from the British, San Francisco's, Presidio, had again and again geared up to protect America from invaders, and today was no exception, as it housed a west coast Homeland Security officer. Richard Dauber had purchased one of the stately officer's residences when the base was decommissioned in the nineties, and, as the internet passed below his feet, from AT&T's Room 614A that analyzed the continent's internet traffic for the NSA, it seemed a fitting place to invite ZEN to discuss the latest security threat. Today, though, the threat of attack was different; had ZEN's systems been infiltrated as a smokescreen? No ransomware had been installed and no data appeared to have been stolen - at least that what had been reported to Homeland Security, and that made no sense. He hoped that Anna, Adam being too busy to call on his own Government, was going to supply the answers.

Anna hadn't noticed the pistol on her driver's hip, as he hadn't bothered to open the door of the large black Mercedes SUV when he collected her. Now though, having arrived at their destination, as he opened her door and snapped to attention, his jacket flapped back to reveal a 9mm Glock. Anna took this to be a possible omen of what was waiting for her inside the imposing Colonial structure and a slight shiver went through her. Having negotiated the building's security - she had to leave her smart-phone and

bag at the desk., she was escorted to an office to wait. The few minutes that she was kept waiting gave her just enough time to study the occupant of the room; the bookcase contents varied from classic John Le Carre stories, to Graham Greene novels, to financial scandals, to biographies of John, Paul and George, but not Ringo, and the Oxford Book of Quotes. A circular wooden stand displayed some fine pieces of jade. The room's artwork included early American maps and a classically executed painting of the Golden Gate Bridge. A silver Meiji-period Chanoyu tea set sat on the painted Japanese table that bridged the space between her button-back leather sofa and a kidney-shaped Georgian mahogany desk. The desk featured a single item; a simple silver frame showing a photo of an elegant blonde mother with two children, which would not have been out of place in Home & Garden.

Her host entered the room with the meeting in progress. "Having read ZEN's report to Homeland Security, Anna, nothing was taken? Is that a fact?"

Anna casually looked the man up and down, taking in a blended academic and military vibe; an average height, fit looking and lean, over-long hair for a military man. But his uniform was spotless perfection. This was not a foot soldier.

"The report generated by our security staff said so, so I've no reason to doubt it," she countered, but not used to being on her back foot, her voice was not as definitive as the military man's.

"Is that so? Why don't you walk me through what YOU know," accenting the word as if he knew his captive audience didn't have a full grasp of the situation. "Because that's not what Don McKesson tells me. So, and I'd rather not keep repeating myself, let's start with how Robin Hood, to use the annoying sobriquet that the media seem to love, got in."

“Let me start by saying that the Director, whose password was used, has offered his resignation, and it was accepted.”

“Is that so?” Came back the sarcastic response. “Ironically, whoever they are may have helped us.”

Now it was Anna's turn to play inquisitor. “In what possible way, could a break-in help anybody?”

“Not you perhaps, but it falls into a scenario that we may need down the line. But before I go into detail you will need to sign this.” And, the colonel slid a document headed 'Defense Secrets Act 1911' across the desk.

Both sat in silence during the review of the short document, which promised, for any infraction, the signer, immediate detention without trial followed by life in prison. Anna knew that signing was simply a formality as ZEN had taken the Government hook some years ago, and, after the show of absorbing it, she slid the signed document back across the desk.”

“The current program is to have an addendum,” started the colonel, as he inserted the document through the slit in the metal drawer, in his otherwise antique desk. “What you already do for us is greatly appreciated, but we would like you to develop a site for us. A dark site similar to Silk Road, but easier to find, simpler to navigate AND with a built-in VPN.”

“Are you joking or just crazy?” Slipped out before Anna could hold back.

“And we would like you not to block ANY content, no matter how repulsive.”

“Now I know that you're joking,” and it was said without a hint of humor.

“Do I sound like I'm joking?”

“Is this why I just signed that document?”

“Yes. And you should understand that it's simply an addendum to the ENDGAME project set up by Adam.” A

hint of harshness had entered the room.”

“But any leak that we are involved in will kill us overnight. No advertiser is going to come near us, because they won't know what ad crossover could come up in the results. You do know that we're already having problems with our advertisers whose products turn up next to items that they can't be seen to endorse. Now you want to involve us with extreme violence, hate speech, pornography and God knows what else. This order is nothing but a death sentence for us.”

“That's not the case and you know it. This project will eventually pay your country, if not the whole of the civilized world, dividends. Sure your reach is already global, but what if we could guarantee you global marketing domination. When Big Blue licensed the MSDOS operating system, every other PC manufacturer, afraid not be part of the standard, followed suit. And even though every time the software was revised, a wave of dread went through the global IT community, like a Tsunami, because the implementation was mandatory to ensure compatibility. That one deal made the suppliers the king of the software world - until ZEN came along. We know that whatever ZEN does, billions automatically download the updates. We already have, thanks to you guys, over ten million files on individuals, their friends and their family members, but we need to look at the disruptive and anti-social elements in the community. And, that's where the dark site will come in. It will identify not only the bad guys, but the good guys with bad habits, and *their* contacts and family members. As a starting point you have our permission to hack into the all of the genealogy sites for their massive databases of familial associations.”

“So this is a dragnet operation? I have already said that we can't accept it. It's not who we are! It's not what we do! I have to ask where this is coming from?”

“The top, in fact the very top. He even came up with the name for the project - VALHALLA”

“The mythological hall of the slain god's. That's some sense of humor!”

“Let me explain,” and, as the colonel did, a frost settled in the room.

“Without seeming rude, it would seem that you need a history lesson. We chose to work with ZEN and then, like we had done with others before, we made you into a household name. We don't care that you front-end load search results with your own products, while taking fees for from competitors. That's not important to us, because you supply us with what we ask for.

The continual use of the word “us” bothered Anna, but she let it go.

“This plan has been in the works for decades. When Big Blue let us know that they had plans for a personal computer, we understood better than they did the appeal they would have. Sure it would take time for the public to want one, or so we thought, but even though the first PC wasn't that great, we underestimated their popularity. The processor from Intel was OK but would not have been *our* first choice as Motorola and National Semiconductor both had better and faster processors. No one cared much for the operating system as Digital Research and Bell Labs both had written better ones, and a UK company had written one with both sounds and graphics for the Commodore *Amiga* that Andy Warhol demonstrated at their Lincoln Center launch.” And, the colonel smiled as he said, “A great machine, but they went broke” and he continued, “Anyway, within ten years there were hundreds of millions of PCs in both corporate and private hands, and that was the time that we had been waiting for. So many PCs with so much private information that we wanted to get at, so we had the military release the Internet. I have to admit that, even

though it was the time that we'd been waiting for, we were lucky; a proprietary Internet browser was included in the system software under the claim that it was impossible for it to be removed and have the PC still function, which meant that we only had one to tap into one browser to capture most of what we wanted. It had been a pure genius move, second only to Microsoft's decision to sell a non-exclusive license for the system software to Big Blue, that meant that there was one software protocol for us to hack.”

He paused for effect.

“But that was then and this is now, and now, you, ZEN, thanks to us, are the only company with such a reach.”

The pause was lost on Anna.

“But the President has children. And looking at your desk you also have daughters. Have either of you thought about what he's about to unleash? The things in this office signal to me that you are not just a one dimensional soldier; a simple follower of orders.”

Colonel Dauber was on the verge of becoming irate.

“I had hoped that you'd understand, if I explained it in simple terms. And, I'm disappointed in how you are viewing all this. You should not forget that ZEN worked against the election of the present Administration; you tried your hardest to have that woman elected and that cost you and Adam most of your political capital. You are very fortunate not to have been punished somehow. And as a direct answer to your question; yes, I have a family, but I am also an official in the employ of the United States Government. And, one who is just passing instructions, to, in this case, and I'm afraid to put it this way, but this is getting tiresome, Anna, a contractor. Now, I've already spent more time than I intended on discussing this with you. Our general specification for VALHALLA will be sent over by courier later today.” The colonel stiffened to stand to end the meeting.

“How are we to explain this to our fellow directors, let alone programmers? Our, “Do only Good,” mantra is already considered a joke by many, because of our voracious marketing tactics. Sure we could simply order the work to be done, but not without great personal internal turmoil. What if we simply refuse and start a campaign against Government overreach?”

“I was hoping that, like Adam you'd be reasonable, So, let me repeat, Missy, we own you, so you'll just have to find a way. Otherwise, we'll have the FCC mandate you as a publisher. And you know what that means; you will be responsible and legally liable for everything, and I mean everything, that you broadcast. You have to understand that when we linked ZEN to all, and I mean all, of the government services, you became our conduit. When we accepted your technology as the preeminent software for self-driving cars and all the other asynchronous Government communication installations, we did so for one reason. You should have spoken to Adam before you came in here trying to be Joan of Arc.”

Anna was stunned. After a threat like that she knew to say nothing more. She waited for a break in the mood, the seconds feeling like minutes, hoping that an alternative strategy would be offered; a compromise that they could support with a clear conscience, but none came.

The colonel reached for a button on his desk, as he stood. “I'm sorry to leave like this, but I'm meeting my daughter for lunch and you know what Friday cross-town traffic is like in the city.”

Anna attempted a light goodbye with a handshake, but an unfriendly smile played across her lips, as she exited the mansion. She instructed her driver to wait. She crossed the grassy square, past the children and young parents picnicking, and climbed the steps of the Disney Museum. Walt Disney had always been a hero to her; she had grown

up with his movies and TV programs, and, now, perhaps in her distress, she might catch a movie in the museum to lighten her mood. Her luck was out; Pinocchio was half way through and anyway this political spoof was not what she would have needed.

She wondered how Disney might have handled the Government's order. Would he have been Walt Disney the patriot that testified in front of HUAC, or the Uncle Walt that left the studio to build his own scale railway and then construct the iconic Disneyland?

As she was driven away from the Presidio, into the typically horrible Friday afternoon traffic; crawling along Van Ness, past the Tesla showroom, the Beaux-Arts inspired City Hall, and the War Memorial Opera House and Davies Hall, she thought how she and Adam owned the most impressive gilt-edged theater boxes for their corporate visitors to enjoy San Francisco's finest culture in. As her ZEN staff car was jammed in traffic, waiting to join the clogged freeway south, she looked over at the Goodwill store, on the corner of Van Ness and Mission. Faced with the bottom-end of the society's equivalent of her Bergdorf Goodman store, and where the homeless camp of tents and cardboard boxes grew almost daily, she wondered what lay in store for she and Adam. She shuddered, as if a ghost had walked over her grave; hadn't they committed most of their wealth to the trust in their names that benefited the poor? She felt impotent and stupid and then angry. What they had been ordered to do, today, was wrong and Adam would know it. They were a team and they would find a way together. She flipped open her notepad and texted him to meet for lunch - a rare occasion - and told the driver to change the destination to Fillmore.

“Are they crazy?” Adam had to control himself in the small cafe that Anna had picked, because the lunch time

noise in the cafe would give their conversation cover. “Have they any idea how long it took to build a trillion dollar company? Sure they helped us with a couple of contracts, and sure we allow them access to our user's data, but we weren't elected by bribes and campaigning. We had to work for our positions and the bastards are offering us the options of sacrificing our own ethics or being destroyed by the FCC.

Distraught, he sipped his Turkish coffee - he was in no mood to eat - as he looked along the narrow restaurant at the lunchtime crowd of sales staff from the snooty shops and the tourists breaking for lunch, and he envied their piece of mind. And then Anna brought up ENDGAME.

“Why were we doing business with the Government in the first place?”

Catching Adam off guard, he could only think of a simple answer. “It’s always been the way to get ahead. That's how HP and Big Blue and just about every huge company got their break. Government contracts are guaranteed success. They just kick the doors open to other companies because you've been seriously vetted.”

This was not the explanation that Anna had hoped.

“But I thought that we discussed everything - why not ENDGAME?”

Adam thought for a moment and then caught the waitress's eye and asked for an ouzo. Neither he nor Anna spoke until it arrived. This was new ground for her. Adam did not drink anything stronger than wine and certainly not at lunchtime.

As the drink arrived, instead of pouring the accompanying water into the ouzo for the traditional cloudy long drink, Adam simply closed his eyes, as he shot the viscous liquid down the back of his throat. As the burn took hold, he was momentarily back in Corfu on the yacht; the summer breeze through the cafe's open door supplying the

warm trade winds, the laughter supplying the atmosphere.

“It was too good to turn down.” He started, “They offered us the whole US market in exchange for just running the technology for them.”

“But you must have thought that sooner or later they would have come back for their pound of flesh?” And she needed to know how much he was prepared to tell her. “And, exactly who is they?”

‘You might not believe this, but it was the White House.’

“But we put our weight behind this President losing, because we thought him a loose cannon.” Then she repeated almost word for word, the colonel's fireside chat, for the real reason for VALHALLA: “The President wants, and Congress agrees, that the American people have lost their way. In the 1950's, America manufactured ninety percent of the world's goods. Now, we are lucky if we produce twenty percent, and we have become a population of scroungers and homeless. For America to prosper again, we need to look at what made America great in the past. We need to look to the Andrew Carnegie's and the Henry Fords for guidance. Carnegie said, 'Look not at what men say, but at what men do.' Ford in the early days used private detectives to monitor his staff's drinking, their home life and their bank accounts, for potential trouble. Even their children's education was monitored. And, given the power of the internet, there's no reason why the American Citizen cannot be scrutinized the same way; just think how great we could be again, as a country. Then we would have a real system to export, not just the quasi-democracy that we have to support with our military, that we push around the globe, as a cure-all.”

Anna paused as she tried to read Adam's face but it told her that she had doubted the wrong person. The friend that she had turned her back on, had been the more honorable of the two.

“Wouldn't that save lives?” Adam asked, trying for a rationale that would make Anna see sense, and, ironically the one that Dauber had used, and that she herself had used talking to Amrit.

“How much did we grow? And, was that was worth selling out for?” She paused, hoping that Adam would somehow say something that would redeem him in her eyes.

“What do you think? It made us who we are today. And it was agreed by the full Board.”

“But you control the Board; you own fifty-one percent of the shares. Are you fucking crazy? You, no we, are aiding a totalitarian state, and you don't see that it goes against the very soul of the company? Fuck! What's wrong with you Adam?”

He had never heard her swear before. “Helping the US Government and possibly the UN Security Council is hardly selling out. We're directly talking to two billion people and we're doing important work.”

That was it. She had heard enough and she stood to leave. “Sure, Adam, we're doing God's Work!” And knowing she was not married to NASDAQ's Uncle Walt, but the one who went in front of HUAC, said, “I have to meet a friend, Adam, so I'll see you later.”

Chapter VI

The Tidy-Up

Richard Dauber and Don McKesson greeted each other like old friends when they met in the Japanese Tea Garden just outside Los Gatos, in the shadow of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Both had spent time in The Agency in the

Far East and both enjoyed what used to be the elegant simplicity of the culture. Dressed, as relaxed as they could be, in pressed polo shirts, jeans and tasseled loafers, both were so relieved that no one seemed to care very much about Robin Hood's ATM hack just two days earlier. The newspapers had dropped the story, after the first day; the online bloggers that had been momentarily happy not to focus on politics or celebrities were back covering some rapper's new rant and it would seem that even ZEN had closed the book on it. This left the area clear for the professionals and that's what these two were.

The initial search for the tell-tale sign that a Cyrillic keyboard had been used came up empty, but did not completely count out the Russians; likewise, their second choice, the North Koreans, with the anarchic, Band of Brothers, a hot third choice. Some in the agency thought the group responsible for the North Eastern blackout of 2018 was to blame, but Dauber knew that that was eventually traced to solar flares. Homeland Security kept the information quiet, as not to overly concern the public with possible natural weaknesses in the infrastructure.

So far, over a hundred agents and inestimable amounts of processing power had turned up nothing that the FBI could submit to the DOHS, on Robin Hood. All that was known was that a few lines of code gave away a few dollars to the needy. No one had noticed the back door that was left ajar, and no one expected a repeat performance. That was except for the two enjoying a pot of fresh Pu-erh tea among the tranquil setting away from the crowded freeways of the Valley.

“So, it's time to earn your keep Don. You've been at ZEN for two years now, and we've never had to call on you. If you had only one guess at who did this, and another at why, what would you come up with?”

“Only one name. And, only one reason. I'll give you

the reason first and then you can probably tell me if your file on this person would substantiate my thoughts, before we either pick him up for a warning, or, if we have to, dispose of him.”

The tea arrived and Richard completed the ceremony before continuing, “Adam had a partner up to a couple of years ago, and it had been the partner who'd come up with both the search engine algorithms and the database design; you might say ZEN's Coca Cola's secret recipe. They'd met at Stanford, and they were a great combination of super-salesman and creative programmer, until the programmer developed a bad drug habit and started to act out in public. It was around the time that ZEN's first round of public funding was all over the news. The guy was becoming an embarrassment and the underwriters said that it was threatening the IPO, so Adam encouraged the board to fire him. And, if that wasn't bad enough, under their partnership agreement, Adam inherited his Founder's Stock, leaving his friend and partner broke.

“So, it was time to get his own back?”

“That would be my guess. Adam's ghost partner is Amrit Kahn. Run him through immigration and any social programs. He wouldn't have disappeared; he'd just not have been of any specific interest.”

“Not much of a pay-back though, and that's what worries me. If he was capable of hacking the system, then what next?”

“And, that's why we either pick him up, or., if he found ENDGAME on the system and plans to cause trouble for us.... “

He was interrupted in mid sentence.

“Okay, we'll go through whatever we have on him. Trace where's he been these last couple of years, who he's kept company with and how he got back on his feet. We may be a Sanctuary City, but there will be traces somewhere.

Then we decide if it was an innocent prank or not."

Amrit had not been difficult to trace. Indira Banerjee, concerned about her immigration status, had been reporting her payments to Amrit, while telling him that they were under the counter. So, when Don McKesson came to visit, just before closing that quiet misty San Francisco evening, quickly flashing his ZEN security badge, she felt comfortable discussing her ex-employee. She cheerfully explained how Amrit had been a shell of a person when they first met; she had only hired him out of pity and she had been most truly pleased when he pulled himself together. No, she did not feel that he was a threat in any way, as he was just a friendless waif. "He just seemed annoyed that the work that he had done for his previous company was being used, in his words, to enslave people. But he was always courteous, even when he was under the effects of drugs, which was sadly too often, and when he came into his inheritance, he bought me this shop and promised to help, not just me but to protect the Mission District, from further destruction." And, she had found that a very nice thing to say. It was her last comment that sealed Amrit's fate, or so Don McKesson had thought.

It was late afternoon when Roger accepted another glass of champagne from the corporate jet stewardess, on route back to the Bay Area. He had just finished flicking through the pages of *Rolling Stone's* final edition – it had been bought by the fund manager it'd slandered and who promptly bought the magazine and shuttered it - when he took Amrit's short, but precise call. "I have a plan!" no greeting, was offered.

"You do know that if you're suggesting that you and I take on the White House, Kremlin, Knesset, Whitehall and the Elise Palace, and God knows who else, you're crazy."

And he paused, “But count me in. But we'll need an army and they'll have to believe in the cause and most won't.”

“Then we'll have to make them.”

“It won't be a cash issue, that's not important as any good hacker can siphon off from a bank whatever they need anytime they like.”

“I know, so....” And the idea came to him, “It has to be for fun or an ego contest.”

“What, you want to turn it into a game?”

“You have the NSA code that was stolen last year?”

“Who doesn't'?”

“The game should start by us distributing a list of the global influence peddlers and politicians, to our players, or 'friends.' Our friends will install ransomware on the targets' phones, home information systems, computers, cars, and TVs. They then, for some smoke, install fake ransomware, the sort that just pops up a screen, but does nothing else, on around a thousand more companies: power companies, banks, schools and hospitals and the like. In exchange for the information collected, our friends can keep the ransom fees. The 'friend' who collects the most ransom, so it's not all about the data, gets a plantation in Costa Rica.”

“You're one crazy bastard. You think that we should take on the world just because of a marketing program? Not to mention where does the cash come from to buy the prize?”

“Angry, not crazy. And, I paid myself three years back salary, in bitcoin, which translates in today's value to over a billion dollars.”

It was at this point that Anna couldn't hold back joining in. “You did what? You raided ZEN for money?”

“Who's that?” Asked a highly charged Roger ready to hang-up and toss his sim card.

“I'm the wife of the mad bastard who brought all this about.”

“Anna? What the fu...” But Amrit broke off his word with, “It's OK Roger, she's with us sane people, and she's on an untraceable phone like we are. And she can be useful. “

“How do we know?”

“Tell him about the meeting you had with Colonel Dauber, and why we need to do this, Anna,” and in a just a few words Anna outlined VALHALLA and its mission. “So, Roger, we do it first, but for the reverse reason?”

“Let me get this right. ENDGAME was bad enough, but now you're telling me that our Government wants ZEN to set up a dark web just so they can locate and track the bad guys? They will need to knock down all the other dark web portals, break every imaginable VPN code and, many that haven't been invented, and then they'll send out a police force to conquer all evil,” he said with laughter in his voice.

“Basically, yes” Anna replied, “Except, they're also after the good guys with bad habits, and they will not need to use a police force. Agents will use the knowledge on the individuals to influence their policy decisions. Think J. Edgar on crack.”

“Do you really think that we could pull off a project on that scale, Amrit?” Roger wasn't so sure.

“I believe that we can, if we attract the right friends, but we need to get it right, because I really don't feel like spending my life in hiding.”

“So, what's next Amrit? It sounds like you don't want me to start recruiting?”

“No, DHS has already done the leg work for us. So, and this is *extremely* important, before we do anything more, I'd like to get to the implementation outline that Dauber sent over to Adam. We'll use it as our own blueprint.”

“You'll never get another opportunity to get back into ZEN's servers, because you can be damn sure that however

you got in before has been blocked and any secret door that you installed has been bolted shut.”

“Simply, I'll ask ZEN.”

“You're going to have to explain that, Amrit, both said in chorus.”

“A couple of years ago, Adam, started to seriously worry about security for our management, so we developed a range of advanced robots to station outside where our directors and top engineers lived.

“You're not serious!”

“I never heard that,” added Anna, “I thought that they were just one up from the singing, dancing plastic Santas that came out at Christmas.”

“Well, nothing could be further from the truth, Anna, they continually scan the street, for faces and dubious license plates that feature in any, and I mean in any passport, DMV records, and smart phone or criminal register. Within a nano second they know if there's a midget assassin wanted in Morocco for questioning, or just another 6-year child. They scared even the engineers when they were first developed, when, to see if they were equal in talents, we gave two of them the same problem to solve, and they started communicating with each other in a language that had not been programmed and that the engineers could not follow.

“And dealing with one of these creatures is our best bet?” Asked Anna.

“Yes it is. When I hacked ZEN for the ATM giveaway, I registered myself as a irrevocable super-user. In other words, any one of them, and there are over twenty, deployed in the city, will instantly recognize me and they cannot refuse an order from me.”

“So, you can have them run and send data anywhere you tell them.”

“And react in any way that I tell them.”

“Sounds like you have access.”

Amrit thought for a moment and then texted Roger, “I’ve just sent you my access code, so now WE have access.”

Roger responded with, “Thanks, Amrit, now I can be done for wire fraud, as well. Let’s leave it here, as all this world domination and robots stuff is getting to me.”

Anna agreed, “Just take care Amrit, and I mean it; you’re now fighting for the end of civilization.”

“Bye Anna.” But Roger was still uncertain about having the fox’s wife in the hen house.

Amrit was sold though. He had been well aware the dangers might lead him into the unknown, before he hacked into ZEN, but a promise was a promise, and he’d promised Mrs. Banerjee that he would do all in his power to slow, if not stop, the Mission’s destruction. Having bought her city block, he now had some control, and, thanks to ZEN’s charity, he had given her the deeds to her shop, but his new found cause was even more far reaching and possibly dangerous.

Roger was looking forward to resting after his three days in Vegas, and he had been unusually cautious who he met with: he had learned from England’s, Prince Harry, that what happens in Las Vegas did not stay in Las Vegas, and the parties that he had attended all had guards with metal detectors to shake down guests at the door. But this call had unsettled him. He had waited a lifetime to disrupt the men behind the curtain; those faceless billionaires who met in a secret wooded grove just north of San Francisco, or in secure Jackson Hole estates, to decide the fate of the little people. As he looked out of the window, he could see some thirty thousand feet below, a small town asleep; a few lights showed those who, not sleeping, would be worrying about how they could pay their bills or what their Government playing high stake monopoly in DC, would do next to damage them. He knew how the super-rich were ignorant of

any feelings, other than their own. He had experienced the periphery of this world, first hand, when he partnered with a Los Angeles billionaire, in an internet development that failed, because of the other man not understanding the technology, and who then sued him for six million dollars, as a thank you. Having done nothing wrong, it had cost Roger over fifty thousand dollars in legal fees before the suit was withdrawn. This man's name would be added to 'the list', and he would be taught a lesson in why, 'might is right' is wrong. But again, his mind went to, could he trust Anna? Why would she turn against her husband, not to mention living the life of a multi-billionaire? And, with these thoughts, he slipped on his eye mask to grab a few minutes sleep before landing.

Anna ended the call with yet another set of concerns; going home no longer seemed like going home. She'd taken an Uber to sit on a sea wall near the Embarcadero, to talk, ironically overlooking a place of historic incarceration, Alcatraz Island, and just down the coast from San Quentin. She had been people watching during the conversation, watching the people that would have used ZEN software that directed their lives daily, without their knowing. How had it all gone so wrong? How had marketing morphed into behavior modification? Adam had been brought up in a family that knew the rules: his father, a corporate attorney, and his mother ran a charity, so why had he no qualms using and manipulating ordinary people, who he now thought of as, 'the little people,' for their own good. Amrit's arguments had made her start to see another side of the little people. They carried fake Louis Vuitton bags and wore cheap designer clothing, because their celebrities did. They wore rings and pendants the same size and obvious appeal of those that celebrities wore, but with a difference; theirs were not Van Cleef and Arpels or Bulgari. Deep down, her

lifestyle of dining on yachts and in palaces, hosted by global business tycoons and princes was chaffing at her soul; the Italian country girl in her was stirring.

She'd been shocked by the robots that spoke a private language; she'd thought herself more aware than most people of the reach of technology, thanks to the weekend house-parties thrown by the titans of her industry that focused on nothing but the future. She always understood that industry controlled government and that industry was ruthless, and never given a thought to that it could be the other way around. She understood that while AI was touted as creating more jobs than they destroyed, that was not to be the future. Sure, the technology-controlled media told people not to worry. The well-paying jobs in warehouses the size of fifteen football fields combined, would dwarf the numbers of jobs lost in retail, but they knew that, in truth, the use of drones would soon wipe out those new jobs, and it would happen in maybe one or two years not decades. And, that was just retail. Other businesses would be automated to the point of just not needing staff, period. Then what? A stipend system, where three or four thousand dollars was given to everyone who wasn't working. A salve to mask the pain of feeling worthless. A country of deserted windblown small towns where pride of working in the local factory or store had been the community. If America thought that it had drug, violence and crime problems now – and perhaps legalizing marijuana was the sugar on the unemployment pill – wait 'til fifty or sixty percent of the workforce is idle. She couldn't believe that Adam had thought this through; that ZEN was a prime mover in the manipulation of society in a way that Orwell would find funny and Huxley admirable.

Anna knew that Amrit's solution was as extreme as the problem, and, therefore; wrong. It would it takes a global force to counteract a global force, but she needed to

decide whether to involve a group that could potentially make matters worse for the world: they had a poor track record when it came to the salvation business, but she knew that desperate times call for desperate measures. For now though, the immediate question was, where should she set up base now that she no longer wanted to share her life with Adam?

Chapter XII

Sanctuary

If it's true that the victim never hears the shot that fells them, then it's unlikely that Amrit ever heard the high caliber shell, as it slipped through the thick plate glass picture window and spun him to the floor. Neither Anna nor Roger heard the shot either, as their call disconnected milliseconds before the shell struck, so they were not to know that when the authorities had rushed to the apartment, the flip-phone was still clutched in Amrit's hand.

The police notified the FBI, who notified Richard Dauber, who, after some deliberation, and a call to Don McKesson, personally tweeted, that the Mission District's Robin Hood; a disgruntled ex-employee of ZEN Corp. Had shot himself, as the authorities had closed in. The man, a 30 year-old native of India, held an expired work permit and had been squatting in a vacant luxury high-rise in the SOMA district, and, rather than be jailed and then deported, he had taken his own life. As all the evidence had pointed to the fact that he had been working alone, the case was now closed. The armed drone that fired the shot was

not mentioned.

An electronic sweep of the apartment showed the television and the fridge as being the only Internet of Things devices and neither of those had storage memory. The sweep of nearby networks showed nothing open, and, unless the target had a security key to one of those, they too were useless, but their owners would be followed up, on as a matter of course. The catch of the day was Amrit's phone.

Anna had been on her way back home for a change of clothes when the news came through Twitter, and it sent her into a tailspin, as if the bullet had hit her. She instinctively knew that Amrit had been assassinated, and her immediate thought was how much was known about her involvement? Was she next? Would she also have died if she'd have been at the apartment? No, that would have raised too many questions. Amrit had to die alone. She would be dealt with separately. Now she could never be alone again, either that, or she must leave, and, forever. Should she try their emergency protocol? She texted Roger, "Going on short holiday – be in touch – am to change SIM - suggest you do same, A." There was no reply. Had they got Roger too? Was that why they felt comfortable in disposing of Amrit? What would Roger tell them? She had to get the hell away from the Bay Area. She inserted a new SIM, dropping the old one out of the Uber rental's window and dialed a number that she had not dialed in some years.

The Pontiff read L'Osservatore Romano every morning over a breakfast of dry oatmeal and fruit. A man of the people, with simple tastes, Cardinal Ortega had for that very reason been a popular choice of the conclave of cardinals. And, for that same reason, he preferred, rather than have his secretary précis the news for him, to read the paper himself. That morning, taking in the mention of the

fatal capture of San Francisco's, Robin Hood, he wondered to himself why the poor couldn't be granted such largess more often.

Then again, his South American heritage had educated him in the ways of multinational corporations, so he knew exactly why such events could not happen more often. Nevertheless, this technological intervention was firmly lodged in his subconscious, as had he not lectured governments, as well as, corporation of the need to be kinder and gentler and not to focus on profits at the expense of people? Had he not seen, in the time that he had risen to the pinnacle of the Church, the world transform into an uncaring place, like no other time in history? And, had the governments and corporations not been at the root of the problem; less combatant countries raped for their resources, their people going without, leading to the wholesale bombing of innocents, by tyrants, then again by their supposed saviors. Even where there was no war, nations were held hostage by corporate trade deals, to the point where the governments had to subsidize the lives of its citizens, with affordable housing and subsidies.

But there was no time for further thought, as Pope Pius XIII, was driven away in his custom white Fiat 500, his secretary by his side to address a Polish trade delegation at the nearby Gran Meliá Hotel.

“Your Holiness, did you see the article on San Francisco's modern day Robin Hood?” Asked the Honorary Prelate.

“Yes, Piero I did. It was truly sad that the man had been sufficiently desperate to commit the mortal sin of taking his own life.”

Piero Montalbano had not always been a priest, and, in his tailored clerical clothes, often did not appear that this was his calling. Having spent many years in the U.S., he had developed many disruptive interests, including alcohol and

drugs, that until he found his calling, should have been the end of him. But, through the desperate step of joining a seminary, followed by fortuitous family connections, he had ended up in the exalted position of assistant to one of the most powerful people in the world.

“That was no suicide, Holiness.”

“But why would the authorities not have just arrested him?”

“We have arrived your Holiness, but perhaps later in the day you would permit me to tell you more about what I believe happened in San Francisco?”

Dusk's long shadows were falling across Saint Peter's square, as Piero confided in the Pontiff, the details of his early morning phone call from California, and the faithful milled around the Basilica hoping to catch a glimpse of the Holy Father, or, at the very least a crimson-robed Cardinal.

“It would seem that San Francisco's Good Samaritan was assassinated because he was trying to stop a number of Government-sponsored social manipulation schemes.”

“Piero, please don't tell me that you believe in all this Deep State nonsense! Mother Church needs to keep a balanced view of the World.”

“No and yes. An organization has been empowered, in exchange for government access to the collected data, to track the activities on all UN citizens, and the man who was assassinated was attempting to somehow stop the program.”

“I hardly feel that any countries are going to further sign away those sorts of permissions, with so much concern over privacy going on.”

“They have, and it's because of the international chaos that they all face.” A detailed explanation followed, including how The Mission district of San Francisco was being transformed into a tech-worker city, to house the data

and the workers and of City Hall's unwritten clearance orders that have unmarked vans scooping up drunks and prostitutes for free rides out of town. "Theirs is not a mission of kindness, as was the Mother Church in the 17th Century."

"But that's impossible. There's no way of gathering that sort of data."

"Think again, your Holiness. The Western World is already a world of cameras and sensors. How many fingerprint and iridology-based security systems are already in existence? Now add two-way capable televisions, tablets and phones logged into social media. Have you any idea how often the average person uses Facebook, Snapchat or Twitter? Military-designed DNA-based security systems are about to make their way into commerce. Many customs and immigration systems collect the very data that is needed to secure national borders. We should not forget the Third Reich and IBM."

"Surely, such a system could never work with any degree of accuracy? I recall that the late American Senator, Edward Kennedy, was on the no-fly list, because there was a person of interest with a similar name. The unintended abuses could be terrifying. Are you suggesting that innocent people be driven to police stations by their driver-less cars? Could friends of friends be arrested under stretched laws? Surely, no company has the ability and the global-reach to create such a megalithic system and how would such programs be funded? I do not know about other countries, but Congress is not going to pass such a stupidity."

"The United States Congress may not directly be involved. It wasn't spoken of much at the time, but all of the multi-region partnership treaties, of the last ten years, have given policing authorities to corporations." He paused for effect. "And, an American corporation is to solely operate the programs in exchange for the unlimited marketing

rights to the non-criminal data that it collects. The same corporation has also recommended the discontinuing of physical bank notes, in favor of plastic cards for regular citizens, and, an allowance of a monthly stipend accessed by 'recognition systems' for the poor.”

“We are living in shameful times, Piero.”

“Yes, Holy Father, but as disgraceful as such plans are, there is another project that I have been privileged to hear of,” and he paused, “And this one may strike closer to Mother Church.” Again a pause. “A new branch of American Homeland Security is to scour a family's past and present, for dubious habits, activities, hobbies and pastimes.” And he emphasized, “More importantly, they are to create and operate a Dark Web portal to trawl for miscreants in positions of power; national leaders buying black market weaponry, or those who have a taste for child pornography.” Both clerics winced slightly at this mention. “This information is for US Government secret agency eyes only, but we have offered the remarkable opportunity to not only view, but to alter, this information. Which, in the current climate, might usefully alert us to the discoveries that might compromise the Holy...”

The Pontiff did not allow Piero to complete his thought.

“I am not like my predecessors, Piero. I have never put the Church or commercial profit in front of people. I would welcome light to be shown on any unsavory practices, no matter by whom. As in the Bible, I threw the money changers out of the temple when I ordered that the Bureau de Change be removed from the bridge between the Basilica and the Vatican Museum. What you are suggesting could bring about a momentous change for the Church: right thinking politicians replacing corrupt ones on a global scale. Please make contact with anyone that you feel fit.” And, the expression on the Pontiff's face was that of a man who felt

that he could change the world to that of his anointer.

The time was right for Piero to explain how his sister was married to the most influential man in the world of technology, and possibly the world itself, and how he was instrumental in this new evil. And, how she had started to counter the project, with her friend, Robin Hood, who had just been assassinated, and now she herself was in danger. She was in San Francisco, and she alone knew the full details of what was to be implemented.”

The Pontiff's eyes darkened. “This time the Church will act. We cannot afford to sit on the sidelines, or worse, endorse these sorts of societal atrocities.” The Pontiff thought again for a moment, "I believe that Boeing has completed servicing Cardinal Faust's jet in Seattle. Please tell your sister that perhaps we can be of some assistance.”

Chapter XIII

Do We Have a Problem, Don?

Don McKesson had served under four administrations, but this was his first trip to the White House. It had been requested by the man who was considered to be an unorthodox and hands-on President and who had a reputation for micromanaging all areas of Government. Having been elected, because of his strident stance on national security, he was interested in why a foreign-born computer scientist, who founded the Government's number one technology partner and had been positively vetted, was the first person in the U.S. To be assassinated by a Secret Service drone.

The wait to be taken into the Oval Office was not an

easy one. No one wants to mark time waiting to give bad news to their boss. And this was today's mission. As the staffer finally opened the door and Don McKesson entered, he did so to the extended hand of the imposing six-foot-three President of the United States. The greeting felt formal, more than cordial, as they made their way in silence to their respective sides of the coffee table, surrounded by plush comfortable arm chairs.

Then the President spoke, "I hear that we may have a problem, Don, is that true?"

As Don McKesson answered this, far from simple question, he was taking in the flags behind the great desk, the Great Seal woven in the carpet, the paintings and the general majesty of the room. "It would seem that an anonymous caller identified, Dr. Kahn, as a follower of ISIS, and that at a set time he was to use a cellphone to detonate a parcel in Macy's on Union Square. The SWAT team had been advised that the first clear shot should be a 'go'." And it was at this point that he recognized that the President, who was the commander in all things Homeland Security and military, should have known these facts.

"And, is it common for us to mobilize an armed drone, hundreds of feet above one of our great cities, on what could be a crank call?"

"Well, sir, the caller knew that the target would be at that location, and, at that time, so it did not seem like a crank call."

The President questioned the logic behind an anonymous caller. "Tell me, Don, who would you imagine to, not only have access to this information, but would want *us* to kill the target?" Do we have a major problem, Don?"

"Well, sir, possibly. The telephone recovered from Dr. Kahn was an old pay-as-you-go flip-phone that had been programmed to erase the last number dialed, or received, after each use."

The President pursed his lips and folded his arms, as if he was in a draft. "With all our tracking technology, why would that be a problem Don?"

"Well sir, and I understand that you're really not up on the old technologies," and he quickly added, "And there's no reason why you should be, but the fact that it's a flip-phone greatly suggests that its use was supposed to be untraceable. The missing incoming and outgoing information strongly suggests that he could have one, or more than one, co-conspirator. So you see that's why we may have a problem."

"I would like many questions answered, Don. Why is there is no file on Dr. Khan? There must have been one created before, when we hired his company to set up and run our records section? Was he a Muslim, Don? It would seem that we do not know who his friends are, or should I say were. Why is that Don? Did he have links to the Kremlin or Pyongyang? Why so soon after San Francisco's Robin Hood? Was he connected in some way? Are we looking at a challenge to our banking system, Don?"

"I have no idea sir."

"Information is key, Don. Even before I was President, I wondered why, as the most important country on Earth, we did not establish a permanent record of mankind's achievements, so I have instructed a study on how long it would take to set us a new Alexandra Library. I'd like America to have a copy of every document in existence. What do you think, Don? You've been at ZEN for two years now, so what's your feeling about that? Do you think they could handle it?"

"I think that's a worthwhile project, sir, and ZEN's your company." Don had managed to answer before he thought it through; otherwise his face would have broken into a broad grin at such a crazy idea. Sure, he thought, let's start colonizing Mars at the same time, sir.

It was without warning that the President's mood changed.

"Should I regret having you as our inside man on this Dr. Kahn issue, Don?"

"No sir. We could still find something in the phone.

"What does the FBI think, Don?"

"They think the same, sir."

"Why was he not taken alive?"

His name, so often mentioned, that he thought himself back at school, talking to his headmaster. "I believe that I already answered that, sir."

"And, when will we know who the anonymous source was, Don?"

"Soon sir.. As you said, with all our technology, its only a matter of time."

"You're doing a great job, Don, keep it up and from now on, report only to me. And I mean only to me - no one else, not even Richard." The President stood and extended his hand, "Thanks for coming in, Don, and I appreciate being kept in the picture, but I have to warn against presenting me with two negative scenarios in a row." And the door opened for an anxious Don McKesson to exit the inner chamber, wondering, after the mixed messages as he left, where he stood.

Sure, in due time, and if appropriate, the President would be informed that the phone call had been traced to coordinates in the Valley. Asphalia had taken just milliseconds to identify the voice, as belonging to a male in his early to mid thirties and well educated, and the subject was stored on the companies VIP server, in Ankara, Turkey.

ZEN's customized Asphalia information system for Homeland Security had been globally fault-tolerant for some years and had never been cloud-based. Too many security breaches of cloud systems had taught the Service that it was simply unacceptable, but the cloud had proved to

be an invaluable source for Service of the otherwise private documents stored by businesses and individual citizens. To these, the Service had appended their respective owners' voice prints and DNA records. It had surprised Don that the voice print was on the VIP server, as it was thought to only hold friends, and it surprised him even more to learn that the voice was Adam's. To be an error would have been too coincidental, so what was Adam playing at? Had he worked out that Amrit was behind the ATM hack, and that he needed to be shut down, before he could talk about finding the ENDGAME files?

There was no way that Don would have known the real reason, as it was the oldest reason in the book - jealousy. Adam had noticed a growing change in Anna's attitude for some time. Not just in her questioning ZEN's activities when it came to who they supported and what they published, but in her own show of independence. She was beginning to misunderstand her place in his world; he could take her wanting to change their house, so it was less like a guy's place - even her redecorating the yacht furniture hadn't really bothered him, but when she argued politics, it really was annoying, and her complaining about ENDGAME, over lunch, went too far. He sensed that she wouldn't have understood, and that's exactly why he kept her away from the meetings with Homeland Security. Now that she'd turned on him so vehemently, he needed to know how much of a security risk she had become, so, after she stormed out of the cafe on Fillmore, he ordered another Ouzo to add space between their leaving, and he used the tracking app, on her phone, to follow her. He had known the danger of letting her take the meeting with Dauber, but he'd thought that if she could see the level of power that ZEN was involved with, she would come around. He had hoped that she would be professional enough to keep her personal

opinions to herself. Instead, she had reacted like a spoiled brat, not like the representative of the world's most powerful data company, and she'd put their very existence in danger. Just who did she think she was? Just a few years out of college and living the richest life a person could, at the greatest time in the world, and she thinks that she can dictate how the world should be run. He knew better. Her idealistic view of how the world should be run was stupid and naive; how did she not understand that only a strong government could protect people from themselves, and that the United States government was the strongest in the world?

Another perfectly mild California morning had broken, as Adam sat in his car outside Amrit's SOMA apartment tower. Having left Amrit sleeping, it was just after seven when Anna left in the Uber to go home to change, and another hour passed before Amrit's car pulled out of the underground garage. In some ways, it had been no surprise; Anna had been close to Amrit before he had him fired, and, although he hadn't cared enough to find out how his ex-partner lived, once his life had been destroyed, it now really troubled him that he was now living like a wealthy man. Had he somehow used knowledge that belonged to ZEN to make his money? That betrayal; the using of company property, was worse than him corrupting Anna, and it must be punished. In his anger, it all made perfect sense; he had tolerated Amrit's socialistic views while he was a useful partner, but ZEN, being the global powerhouse and influence that it now was, that stage had long passed. He recalled how Anna had tried to save Amrit from being fired, as if she really cared for him, and now that Amrit was single and had resources, he was also a threat to their relationship. Something had to be done, and the something had to be firm and final. Adam knew the number

to call and the fatal words to say, and the problem would be over. Or so he had thought.

The prearranged distress signal was to book a table for lunch at the Empress of China in the name of Tesla, and that's exactly what Anna did. She had her Uber car drop her outside the TransAmerica building and walked through the tourist-crowded streets to arrive half an hour early, so she could sit in the bakery across the road to see if Roger would turn up. And, if he did, whether he would be alone. Cautious as never before, fear now ruled her actions.

There were too many options for her liking. If Roger turned up, there was still no guarantee that he was straight, or that they were not both in danger. If he did not turn up then, well, that was too grave to consider. And there were too many open questions. How was Amrit tracked so fast? Why kill him? Did that mean that they had not needed to interrogate him?

And as she waited for Roger, or whoever, to turn up, she just wanted to go back to the week before, when choosing the menu for the yacht's, Chinese guests, was the most important task for the day. But then her phone vibrated, 'Meet me now at the Portsmouth Square parking garage - level 3 - black BMW - headlights on.'

When Anna pulled the door closed, she felt that she could breathe properly for the first time that day. "Why would they kill Amrit? Can they trace us through his phone?" What do we do now?"

"Calm down Anna, the calls can't be traced, but they will be aware that he was talking to someone, and that puts us in danger. So we need to leave, and fast."

"And go where?"

"Our only option is south. I have a mate in La Jolla, and if we can get there, he will run us to Mexico in his yacht."

"But how? We'll be picked up by cameras on every freeway, and your car has digital license plates."

I rented the car this morning, in another name, and I've already reprogrammed the license plates, with a new ID, which we can change every few hours to another registered black BMW, if we think that we've been picked up by a camera. I've also jammed the tracking module, so we stand a good chance of making it, if we take the tourist route. We'll leave the city past the zoo; take Skyline through Boulder Creek to Santa Cruz, down the coast past Big Sur, and through Santa Barbara to Southern California. It's about a 14 hour trip, and we're expected around noon tomorrow, so we'd better get going."

Anna wasn't used to thinking like a fugitive, and, although she was pleased that Roger seemed to be, she still wondered if there was a way to deny her involvement. Then she reluctantly accepted that only a Government department would have had the planning and resources to kill Amrit the way it had, so they would have known about her, as well. So, for better or worse, here she was, trapped with unknown Englishman, in an illegal vehicle, running away to save her life. "Well, we better get going then."

The ride down the coast was thankfully uneventful. Roger stuck to the speed limit, and, outwardly, they seemed like father and daughter on vacation. As the journey progressed, they began to exchange the life stories that had brought them to the point of conflict, with what seemed like a doomed venture.

This was easier for Roger, whose past had almost always found him in the position of being outside society looking in. For as far back as he could remember, it had seemed the most natural place for him to be. Now, that society had morphed into nothing but a mindless mass, it seemed the only sensible place to be. He despaired of a world where people fell down holes, or were hit by cars, as

they crossed streets, because they were texting and not paying attention, and where personal electronics never worked properly, because they were always sold with bugs, to be fixed with the next update.

His stories from the past amused her. He had been present when the UK's Minister for Energy turned on the UK's first oil-flow from the North Sea, but in reality the flow had been from a pipe linked to an off-camera oil barrel. He had been at a 1980's launch of a revolutionary personal computer, when he noticed a cable coming out from the machine that shouldn't have been there, and he followed it to a Digital Equipment VAX that was doing all the work. Anna was fascinated by these, and, other manipulated news stories, which in some ways made her feel better, and in other ways, worse, as it showed that fake news was nothing new. She found Roger's stories sufficiently familiar to her father's tales, which made the renegade Brit seem more real, and, as they pulled into the Nepenthe Restaurant at Big Sur, after some five hours in the car, it was her empty stomach that most occupied her mind.

Looking down, past the jagged rocks to the ocean, from the eagle's nest of a restaurant, the conversation naturally turned to why they had become involved in such a crazy act. Both had arrived at their decisions from different paths. Roger told of the talk he gave in Las Vegas, and how Amrit had turned up, out of the blue, with ENDGAME on a thumb-drive, and she laughed at the FBI having paid him. Her position was also idealistic, but from the other side of the lens: she had watched the internet descend into a pork barrel for advertisers and a trough for the search engine operators, singling out her ZEN as the worst offender. When the burgers came, they ate like they had both been starved for days, and, now nourished and mellow from eating, over coffee, they continued to compare philosophies.

"When the Sixties movement started, we were just so

naive," started Roger. "But look at us now. Despite the fact that, sure, Man's activities have impacted the atmosphere, I just get the feeling that the Global Warming movement is not just about climate control. Take the power-generating companies. They're corporations with shareholders, so although their job is to sell electricity and gas, they tell the public that it's bad for the earth, so don't use as much. That enables them to sell less, but legally at a greater price, because they are selling less. The same goes for water, but with a twist. When California introduced water rationing, it was only for the people, not the farms that grow exported fruit and nuts or beef; they get a discount on their water. Take a shower, get a fine - export water, get a discount."

"Maybe, but isn't using less power and water conservation good for the earth, as well?"

"Possibly, yes, or perhaps it doesn't have an impact. Have you ever thought about the more obvious tricks pulled on us? We are told that natural gas is healthier for the environment than other fuels, so fracking became a huge business. When the fracking-induced earthquakes started, studies funded, by the fracking companies, showed that they're coincidental, and, anyway, it will make gas cheaper to the consumer. Then, Congress repeals the energy export ban, that came in during the seventies, and the producers export the gas overseas, and we get even higher prices, along with earthquakes. Shale oil is the same, except substitute earthquakes for pipelines, across sacred Indian lands, and rail car crashes that burn for days, just so oil companies can send the product overseas."

Anna was not sure about Roger's negative analysis of corporate America. It was beginning to sound the wrong side of rabid for her, but, if the internet had become what is was today, from the information system that it was designed to be, then maybe he wasn't totally wrong. And, wasn't the pollution of the web what she criticized Adam for just two

days earlier. Anyway, whatever way she looked at it, corporate terrorist or not, she and Roger were joined at the hip for the time being, and this was no time to alienate the only person that was in a position to help her. "How long before we get to La Jolla?" She asked.

"Could be another nine hours, maybe longer, depending on the road. I haven't driven this length of Highway 1 since the eighties."

Roger paid in cash, and they rejoined Highway 1 South.

Chapter IX

Who Are They, Where Are They?

"It's, Don, on line one," Adam's PA called through the intercom, "And he wants to come in to see you and he says it's urgent."

"That's fine, send him in as soon as he arrives."

The near somber-faced security director entered the room with, "I would have thought that you'd have known your own systems better than to try an anonymous call. What the fuck were you thinking? And why in God's name did you do it? I haven't told anyone else yet, but I'm going to have to, so we better get your story straight - that is if you have one." And he repeated, "Please tell me, Adam, just what the fuck you were thinking, and perhaps, just perhaps I'll understand. And perhaps, just perhaps, I can help you survive."

"She was seeing Amrit Kahn?"

"Who was?"

"Anna."

"So, he had to die. And, you used the Government to pull the trigger? Literally! "You do know as stupid as it would be to do, I could have arranged it for you."

"I wasn't thinking straight. I was angry."

"No, you were stupid."

Don was starting to gain control of his thoughts. "Why was she seeing Kahn?"

"I don't know, but she was starting to find fault with me, in ZEN and in ZEN's missions, and Kahn had either the money or the backers to cause us serious trouble. I have a feeling that he was behind the ATM give-away, and that would just have been the beginning. I acted to protect ZEN."

"Don frowned, and, in a quieter voice added to Adam's concern, "You may be right, because the ATM thief has fucked us good and proper. Alarm bells went off an hour ago, when accounts noticed a transfer for just under two billion Euros, from our bank in the Netherlands to an account that we don't recognize. Thanks to Satoshi Nakamoto, the transaction can't be reversed, as the funds were then forwarded into a Bitcoin account."

Now Adam was feeling completely paranoid. "So, where's the money? And, where's Anna? She can't be working alone, so who else do we need to find?"

Don thought for a moment. "If this damages ENDGAME, its the end of VALHALLA, and, that, my friend, means the end of ZEN. So, YOU, don't do another thing; no phone calls, no texts, no conversations of any kind, with anyone about this. Just no nothing. Comprehend? And, I think that you should now go home until I call you. You need a break. Why not take the yacht out to the islands." Adam was firmly benched.

And with that, the chairman out of the picture, Don sat at Adam's desk to see what could be salvaged, before he had to declare a nine alarm fire.

His first call was to the advance tracking department

and was a disappointment.

"What do you mean we can't trace where she is? You're telling me that ZEN can't find one of its senior personnel, and the wife of the founder?"

"I know that it sounds incredulous, but we have no trace of her" answered ZEN's senior technical expert, "She's not carrying a phone. She's not at any of our apartments. No company car is unaccounted for. No airline, ship, rental or Uber car has her booking. A facial recognition system picked her up in China Town some hours ago and another at the Portsmouth Square garage, but she never came out in a vehicle, or up through the elevator or stairs. Since then, nada!"

Don tried not to show his disappointment with the technician's lack of lateral thinking. "Okay. So I want every vehicle that came out of the garage, after Anna went in, run through our system. She was in one of them, and if it wasn't her car then she has a buddy for us to identify. And if any vehicle has fake plates, then I want the area signature scan for those vehicles and a voice print of the conversations from the vehicles' black box. We've got the bastards."

His next call was to Richard Dauber, and, keeping his cards close to his chest, he avoided Adam's involvement and Anna's war chest, both of which would have to come out, but only once he had a better handle on the facts. He was not in the mood for another visit to the Oval Office. "We may have done the right thing for the wrong reasons, Richard. Khan's assassination will serve as a notice of our intent, and people running scared make mistakes. I've been looking at possible political connections, and we may have missed something when we vetted Anna's life before she married Adam. Her Montalbano file - as she was then - mentioned that she had a brother, Piero. He's now an adviser to the Pope."

"You've lost me there, Don. How does that play into

the robbery?"

"Deeply, I'm afraid, or at least I suspect that it does. Adam confided in me that Anna had started to criticize ZEN, and really laid into him after you told her about VALHALLA. She came at Adam like one of Italy's Red Brigade, and, if she has an in with this Pope of the poor, then she could have some serious connections. Plus, we can't locate her and that means that she's on the run. Possibly alone, possibly not, and we'll know more when we find her. My guess is that Anna is trying to get to the Vatican, and the safest route is from South of the border, where, as we know anything goes - new papers or a complete change of identity only costs a few thousand, and she may have access to a lot more than that."

"They won't get a lot of help from the Vatican. They're still reeling from the jailing of the Australian pedophile Bishop, and I happen to know that worse is coming. As we're in a position to help, I suspect that we can tie a knot in their Pope."

Don thought for a moment, "That makes me feel better, but that still leaves a lot of unanswered questions. Why the ATM stunt then? All that did was to draw attention to them, before either of them knew about ENDGAME or VALHALLA?"

"And who dropped the dime on Kahn. No, Don. There has to be more going on than just Anna's over-energized social conscience. Get back to me as soon as you know anything further. And I think that we should only get back to the White House when we have something concrete to report."

"Agreed."

As the line went dead both were uncertain as what to do next.

Chapter X

The Shut Out

This might not have been Don McKesson's first rodeo, but this one was different. This time he'd been close enough to the people that had been turned, as to have seen it coming, but he'd failed to do so, so this was personal. And, knowing that this one was to rise or fall on his shoulders, this made him decidedly uncomfortable. His last nationwide dragnet had been almost two decades earlier, and, had today's tracking tools been available, the 9/11 bombers would have been displayed on an FBI's screen before the end of the day. But they weren't, and the catastrophic acts that followed resulted not only in a few trillion dollars spent on wrecking what little quietude existed in the Middle East, but America's infrastructure being short of repair funds and tens of thousands of Gulf War veterans' lives in a shamble.

And the desolation didn't stop at America's shores. As internecine strife took hold between the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense; each blaming the other for creating the power vacuums, as one by one the Middle East strong men were deposed, or when threatened, rained chaos on their people. The weaker Middle Eastern leaders fearful of regime change, aligned with their religion-in-common friends, or sought partnerships further afield, to help terrorize their own people. Religious extremism became fashionable for the first time in centuries, and the millions that could, fled to the West. A millions-strong

exodus swamped Europe, overwhelming the authorities and the most liberal of citizens' sensibilities. The EU fell under the threat of internal revolt from the rise of nationalism bordering on fascism and perhaps, just perhaps, none of this would have happened if the right tracking software had been available.

But Don understood that was moot point.

Closing the barn door after the horse had bolted, with a wildly encompassing Patriot Act, but without real-time tracking in place, as Boston and other places had proven, had also been ineffective. And as that was one of the few ideas that the FBI and this White House had ever agreed on, ENDGAME, the ultimate real-time tracking system had been commissioned. But, if such an all-encompassing system was not capable of finding two suspects whose exact location had been known just hours earlier, then he feared that the next and obvious solution was to chip the population at birth, and that really would be the end civilization with a capital C.

The initial intelligence coming in suggested that the vehicle Anna was a passenger in was either a cherry-red Buick SUV or a black 5-series BMW. Both had fake plates, both had tinted side windows and both their visors turned down against the sun.

"How soon do we find out which is our target?" Richard Dauber asked through the speakerphone that was now to be left on permanently, while Don was in Adam's office.

"Not certain," responded the frustrated head of ZEN security and its acting Chairman. "We've made contact with General Motors and they're communicating with all of their cherry-red SUV's, but BMW are being less cooperative. They need to know why the data and whereabouts on a private passenger vehicle is needed. I suspect that the real reason is

the new import tariff that we just slapped on their cars."

"Tell them it's none of their business and under the information treaty we have with them, they've no right to ask. If that doesn't work, tell them that if they help us now, down the road we'll consider recommending that the tariff be reduced."

"I tried that Dick, but it seems that they went to their Economy Minister who reported the request to the Bundestag Intelligence Committee and now the BNDG is in an uproar as to why we would try to bribe them into cooperation."

"So, they spend billions of Euro a year on intelligence, and we contribute more than our fair share thorough NATO, but they can't respond to a simple request?"

"That's about the measure of it. But we'll get there on our own."

The military man in Colonel Dauber was not prepared to play the waiting game as every minute that went by could mean another mile that Anna was closer to the Mexican border, or worse, further along in a private plane carrying the plans to God knows where, and to God knows who. He knew that once the plans found their way into hostile hands all hell would break loose; it was OK for the US to occasionally tap into a foreign leaders' cellphone, as a heartfelt apology from a senior official for the actions of a rogue operator always smoothed things over. But an orchestrated plan to hack into every international leader's cellphones on a constant basis was a different matter - not only would it bring down the current administration, but it would damage America's credibility for a generation.

It was time for drastic action.

He would ironically invoke the very program that had cost over a hundred million taxpayer dollars, and ZEN three years to create, to locate two of the agencies partners.

Richard Dauber looked around the office that represented the pinnacle of his success. He looked at the photo of his wife and children and knew that if what he was about to do backfired, the home in the Presidio would go, and, after a Senate hearing, he and his family would be posted to some God forsaken part of the world where he could do no further damage.

But he had no choice; these people had to be found and stopped, so he issued the order for the first official use of ENDGAME.

The width and breadth of the program was astounding; this was not the simple red alert system that had been laughed at for so long, as to make it unfeasible to use. Along with the regular all-ports alerts, all-road license plate and facial recognition scans and autonomous drone reconnaissance, it now encompassed the trapping and forwarding of any mention of the suspects in texts, email, Twitter, Facebook and all other social media.

If ENDGAME could not find them, then they were nowhere on the planet.

Entering Anna's social security number into a simple dialogue box triggered hundreds of data sensors across the internet and tens of thousands of its its public and private CCTV cameras.

Simultaneously, operators kept up the old ways and proven search methods and in less than an hour a phone call traced the legal owner of a GM SUV that had had fake plates fitted, to their home in Providence, Rhode Island. Shortly after, the occupants of the San Francisco Buick were arrested for attempting to rob a bank north of San Francisco in Marin County.

That left the BMW, and still neither Berlin nor Munich were cooperating, but there had been a sighting of the BMW heading south on the Embarcadero and picked up

again near the zoo. So, unless they intended to double back, the South was the destination.

But who was the driver?

And then they got a break.

Only one black BMW 5 series had been rented in the city that day, and the Enterprise Car Rental location on Folsom had CCTV. Initially, when the footage was examined by a technician nothing useful could be seen. It just showed a casually dressed man of average height and wearing a baseball hat. He'd paid in cash and put down an extra five hundred as a deposit.

On the third viewing she saw something she had overlooked.

A careless error.

Waiting in line, trying not to seem agitated, the man had picked up a brochure to read. When his turn came, he'd put it back in the rack.

It just might have his fingerprints.

Within minutes, Folsom Street was blocked off from 7th Street to 9th Street and the service's bureaus team, sirens on, lights flashing, careened out of their Golden Gate Avenue garage, for the four mile round trip to retrieve the only possible hard evidence to the identity of Anna's accomplice.

Within the hour, thirty-seven smeared fingerprints had been lifted from the glossy paper.

One partial stood out.

That of Roger de Courcey, a British-born consultant who'd been hired to crack a cell phone that the manufacturer had refused to open.

Receiving the news, Dauber was almost relieved to hear that they were chasing one of their own, as apprehending a member of the Diplomatic Corps would have not only been impossible, but also given cover to Anna. But there were other issues; there was no detailed file on de

Coursey, which meant that he had not been positively vetted for his contacts and friends, and why was that the case?

And they still needed BMW's help.

"The good news, if there is any, Don," started Colonel Dauber, "Is that the outbreak seems to be confined to two known suspects. On the off-chance that it was them passing the zoo, I've ordered a drone to shadow them. My guess is that they'll drop down through Half Moon Bay to Santa Cruz and past Big Sur towards the border. We'll just monitor them to see who, if anyone, they meet, and if it seems that they're just running without a plan, or they get close enough to the border, we'll pick them up."

It was just after noon when the reconnaissance drone lifted into the air from March Air Reserve Base in Southern California, but the black BMW had already turned off the highway and into the Esalen Institute. Minutes away from Big Sur, this exclusive retreat, named after the coastal natives, was now a Mecca for the affluent, seeking self-help workshops, contemplation of the meaning of life and ocean views, which seemed a fitting venue for the hunted to run to.

Having left Anna at the gatehouse, Roger returned some ten minutes later in an early 60's Volkswagen beetle, with a blonde woman in her mid twenties in the driving seat. To Anna, her hair was too blonde, her top too tight and her teeth were an unreal luminescent white.

"Very clever," Anna started, as she tapped the ancient vehicle's fender, "There's no tracking this. And, it comes with a driver."

"Exactly right," responded Roger, ignoring the jibes. "The only chips in here are the ones that people dropped as they were snacking. He started, "Angie meet Anna, Anna meet Angie," and continued, "I've told Angie that we have a drone filming us, as if we're on the run from the cops, and

Angie volunteered to take part in our little movie."

"Hi Angie," Anna said with more than a hint of hesitation in her voice.

"Hi Anna," said the overly and annoyingly cheerful Angie. "This is really brilliant. Thanks for letting me take part."

Roger jumped in, before Anna could reply, "Angie's crazy about the movies. She comes from Kentucky and used to date Johnny Depp's best friend's brother, so she just had to move to California to be in films." Knowing that what he'd just said made little sense, he continued, "She works as a docent at Esalen so she can meet some of the celebrities that stay. We met a while back in Carmel, and when I called her this morning she jumped at the chance to take part."

Angie expertly put the car in gear and joined the highway. "I just loved the part when we had to roll the BMW over the cliff into the ocean. I'm surprised that the coastal authorities gave permission."

Roger stepped in again, "They'll just have to bring it out of a few feet of water," and he continued as if he was explaining the plot, "We just needed to make sure that there was no tracking left in the car. It wouldn't have been a problem if drones weren't involved, as the hills behind us blocked the car's transmitters." In an aside that Angie couldn't quite follow, he said, "Because we haven't been stopped, the way we came must have been safe, but we just needed to make certain."

Anna was amused at this Alice in Wonderland routine, and she knew that if she was ever shipwrecked, Roger was the guy to be stranded with. "What's next in the script, Roger, I left my pages in the hotel?"

"Angie's going to take us as far as San Simeon, where another car will take us to Santa Maria."

"Are you filming at Hearst Castle?" Angie asked in a pleading voice.

"Of course," said Anna, now buying into the spirit of the trip. "If you can stay the night, you can join us?"

"Can I? You bet I can."

"That might work," added Roger thoughtfully.

"I've got another great idea, Roger. This would be a great car to keep in the movie, so after our break at San Simeon, why doesn't Angie take us all the way to San Diego?" And, with that last comment, Anna sat back bemused by the turn of events and the intense thrashing noise of the engine, as it climbed and descended the switchback coastal road.

Some minutes later Roger's phone buzzed, and in a hushed tone he delivered the unsettling news that an access alert that he'd planted on his FBI file had just been triggered. "We may not get as much a lead time as I thought, and, although I have the map of where surveillance cameras are located, your idea about enlisting Miss Kentucky here was a brilliant forethought."

Anna had expected the tracing to be fast. After all, she knew the power of ZEN's search capabilities once dedicated to a specific task, and she sat back and waited for the sky to fall in.

Some further minutes of relative silence passed before Roger was able to alter their plans. Finding that his cell had a faint signal, he sent a text, and moments later he texted a smiley face emoji reply to the response that he'd received.

He voiced an idea. "We have plenty of time, so after Hearst Castle, let's detour to Ojai for the night. It'll be peaceful; a real alt-hippy excursion, and I haven't been there, oh, must be twenty years ago." He continued over the noise of the engine and Angie smiled at them in the rear view mirror, "That's great. I've never been to Ojai - it'll be cool."

Next, he needed a reason not to stop at Hearst Castle,

before they got much closer to that location. Angie seemed so easy going, it shouldn't be a problem. And he closed his eyes looking for inspiration.

He hadn't needed to. The next sign they passed was:
"HEARST CASTLE CLOSED FOR RENOVATION"

Angie was rather crestfallen. "The one chance I get to go, and be in a movie, and I can't."

"Perhaps Ojai will make up for it," said Anna who was now getting used to providential changes, adding, "A lot of celebrities visit there and some live on the outskirts, so you never know who we might bump into." And that was that was needed to cheer Angie up.

A small city in Ventura County, northwest of Los Angeles, Ojai is set in a valley in the Topatopa Mountains. Its village-like center is a morass of art galleries and New Age shops. Every year, the Hippy faithful, whose minds still function reasonably well, gather for the Ojai Music Festival to appreciate the famed classical artists it attracts.

It was early evening when they pulled into town, and they had no trouble blending in with the hundreds of tourists. Anna booked three rooms at the Ojai Valley Inn, while Roger and Angie walked off to celebrity-spot, and when the three met up again, Angie had already made friends with a group of amateur actors who were going the next day to the Santa Barbara Film Festival. It did not take long before Angie decided to go off with them.

Carmelita Obregon Diaz, the owner of Diaz Industria, and the wealthiest woman in Mexico, was the second wealthiest person to phone Magnate Carlos Slim. Her wealth came from transport: trucking, air freight and shipping, and it was exactly the friend to have at a time like this. And, a friend to Roger she was, despite their torrid, but brief affair of more than ten years earlier. His text had come

out of the blue, but she hadn't been surprised that he was in trouble; he liked living on the edge. He'd always said the view was better from there, and she responded quickly and positively to his request. A helicopter from her US subsidiary in Oxnard would pick him and Anna up at the Majlar Heliport at 11 a.m. The next day. It would take them to a private terminal at LAX where they'd board a company jet to Mexico City, and then, after refueling, onward to the island that housed their registered office in the Caribbean.

The text had also included the address of a local photographic shop.

Later that evening, when Roger received another text, he suggested to Anna that she stay in the hotel, as he had an errand to run. She was amused that even on the run and in a small town he not been to in decades, he had something that he needed to do. But this was the side of Roger that she now expected - always planning, always thinking ahead. This was just as well as, unknown to them both, a second government drone had passed along the coast from where they had been not half an hour earlier. And, even though it was unlikely that their change of car was known, it would have sent a chill through Anna to know that they had such a close call.

While Don McKesson waited impatiently for over thirty minutes for the technician to return his call, he discussed strategies with Richard Dauber., who neither could understand what was taking so long and both were clearly annoyed.

"You mean to tell me that the tracking technology: the technology that cost the taxpayer an absolute fucking fortune can't locate two people that we not only know the names of, have files on, but we also know which of our state highways they're on?"

"Yes, sir. That's pretty much the situation, sir," reported the tech into the speaker phone. "And that might

not be a bad thing, as if we can't find them, it could mean that they can't transmit or receive calls or data, so they are also at a disadvantage - on the run and flying blind."

The breathing in the silence that followed sounded very annoyed. "Don, I need this to change and change now. So what is your best guess as to how we do that?"

"Well, Richard, as unlikely as it seems at such short notice, as they could not have known that we were on to them, they must have changed cars. And, that means that their number must be greater than two. Either that or they've stopped along on the road."

"Have we heard back from Munich?"

It was then that Don realized that the tech was on the line, and he dismissed him with, "Martin, get back to me immediately when you hear something, and I think if I was you, I might be looking for another situation."

"You always were a sad bastard," the tech replied as his line clicked dead.

"And *he's* one of us?" The colonel questioned.

Don was in no mood to play nice. "Techs, these days, are real *prima donnas*. The slightest thing goes wrong and they react badly. He's been paid over a quarter of a million a year to make things happen, and he fall's at the first hurdle. He had to go and he knew it. Anyway, Munich finally got permission to help us, but it was too late. The vehicle is neither transmitting nor receiving. And that means its probably been destroyed."

"No chance it's a battery issue Don?"

"None. The chip-set in the car has a battery backup, so it can be activated remotely. Normally just for lockouts, but also for tracking, steering, breaking, driving patterns and a lot of other things, for insurance purposes, and sometimes for listening to conversations."

"OK. All we know is the approximate region and which direction they were headed?"

"And, very little of the coast road has cameras."

"Should we have gone old-fashioned and used road blocks?"

"Ordered them an hour ago, but no news yet."

"What else is on the road that could be of interest?"

"Just some artists' homes, a few restaurants, a couple of five-star hotels and a New Age Institute. All of which have been checked. I'll keep you posted, and please, you do the same. "

While the importance placed on finding Anna and Roger was their central focus, both men were acutely aware that the cat could already be out of the bag. Some days had gone by since the data had been originally sent to ZEN, and if Anna had been set to disrupt their plans all along, then there was no reason for her to have held on to the information. The sooner she passed it on, the less chance there was of her being stopped, and the less important her capture was. Both men silently prayed that the tech was right, and that they were flying blind with information safely and undistributed on a thumb drive.

It was the following morning when Richard Dauber's phone pinged with the news that the BMW had been located upside down, below Esalen, in four feet of water. Don hoped that the occupants were still in the car, but that was not the case. The main gate reported that a member of staff had left recently with two strangers in her vintage VW.

The update was immediately distributed, but the consensus was that other car changes had been planned. And who was this, Angie, who had joined the party? Just how connected was she? Could she get them across the border without being recognized? They'd be a lot wiser after they received the dossier that was being collated and delivered while they were in the land of conjecture.

Her file was slim:

Name: Angelina 'Angie' Hinckley SSN: 767-67-1224
DOB: 5/15/1992. POB: Ohio. USA DMV: 1969 VW
1500.

Reg: CLBSTAR CDL: A 671349 Passport: none issued
Richard Dauber was the first to comment, "Rather sketchy to say the least. No CRO, no passport, and she's in a car that can't be tracked and doesn't have a registered cellphone."

Don stepped in to the conversation. "Why does someone use an unregistered phone, and why wasn't she on our radar before? She must have been using Esalen as a place to mix with international dignitaries and businessmen, and now that her cover's blown, she's making a run for it with the others. Let's bring her in."

When the FBI cordoned off the Santa Barbara Film Festival, all hell broke loose in the auditorium. The noise hadn't been that loud since the Rolling Stones played there in 1969. The celebrities were enraged, the audience was bemused and the compare resorted to his hip flask. The host of the most watched daytime chat show shouted instructions over the din, for her camera crew to record everything, and when the FBI objected, a fistfight broke out, and that was recorded by a team of Channel + film crew visiting from Paris.

Grabbing the microphone from the now unsteady compare, the lead investigator instructed Angelina Hinkley to make herself known by raising both hands in the air and to move slowly towards the stage. A growing circle of space allowed her unfettered passage until, reaching the stage, agents with handguns and military with rifles pointed, wrestled her to the ground, handcuffing and manacled her legs. Now semi-conscious, the New Age Institute's docent was carried out of the auditorium and into a waiting black SUV.

The remaining patrons, who had already decided to remain silent and in place, were informed that armed guards, had permission to shoot anyone who attempted to leave the building, and that everyone including celebrities, would be interviewed before being allowed to leave. Food and water would be brought in, as the exercise would take at least until morning, and possibly most of the next day. At that point howls of complaint rose from the room, including cries of 'will someone call my agent.' An order was then given for large labeled and self-sealing bags to be distributed with the instruction that everyone hand in all cellphones, ePads, smart watches and laptops.

It would be hours before Angie was calm enough to speak and to tell what little confusing information she had; rambling on about movies and drones and San Diego and in the words of Yahoo News, the exercise had been a 'Complete F**K Up.'

Chapter XI

The Contest Begins

Three days before the debacle in Santa Barbara, an unregistered cell phone in the US had called an unregistered mobile phone in London.

"Where did you get my number?" Asked MissyZ.

"From a friend," answered Amrit.

"You have five seconds to give me a proper answer," came a terse but not unfriendly response

"James Nolan gave me your number."

"Jim never shares his real name. You guys must be

close."

"We've been through a few battles together, and now we need help with something that he thought might interest you."

"Sounds intriguing?"

"Amrit gave her enough information to whet her appetite for a fight against the machine. "How many players could you bring to the game?"

"At least one person in every western country - some countries up to five. So about a fifty all told. Enough to make it feel like a blitzkrieg."

Amrit was surprised at the number of high level anarchists that could take part and even more surprised to hear elements of MissyZ's background. She hadn't been just a clever kid with too much time on her hands.

"Many of the people I know come from orthodox business backgrounds; not the sort that started with placards and banners and moved to Molotov cocktails, just to throw wrenches into the system. Most are highly complex people that fall halfway in personality between Michael Milkin and Mahatma Gandhi. Some invest and some play the currency and stock markets, with the money they make working for corporations and governments. Others, I have to admit are real renegades and could be dangerous, but we'll just take a chance on them not wreaking too much havoc just for the fun of it. But the one thing that they have in common is hate of the military industrial complex."

"How will they take to what I've told you?"

"Likes ducks to water."

Until that moment, the moment that he sent the files needed for MissyZ to start, even with Anna and Roger's support, Amrit had felt like Sisyphus wondering if he should not have started the ball rolling. Now though, if, and it was still an if, MissyZ was as connected as she sounded she was, they stood a fair chance of carrying out what even he had

started to think could be a ludicrous and possibly feeble-minded plan.

He was told to watch out in the press for commercial attacks mentioning rivers, as that would be their people: RhineStoner, InSeine, ThamesBanker, VolgaVirgin, MississippiMeg. And, other river names were used by many as a negative homage to the eCommerce giant that all but monopolized the internet."

They needn't speak again, until there was cause to but, as her phone was untraceable, he should feel free to call anytime.

In the shadow of East London's 'Stage' development, the luxury apartment site, named for Shakespeare's first theater, sits Pizza East. At a table near the door sits ArkAngel (MissyZ), and on her laptop screen can be seen the list of world figures that she has forwarded to her list of players looking to win the estate in Costa Rica.

In her mid-thirties and a refugee from the Boston-based venture funding firm that funded much of London's East End slum development, MissyZ had become disenchanted with how the residents were dealt with as their wonderfully gritty East End of London was being turned into Singapore. Her degree had been in Business Administration, with a minor in Mechanical Engineering, and she'd won beauty pageants to put herself through college. Although she'd improved her university's computer systems, because she was attractive, she had been hired as the public face of the development. It was only later that she understood that it had been with good reason she had been shouted at, and her Mercedes had been vandalized.

She had naively believed that her company acted in the best interest of the locals, but that was until they syndicated the loan to China and brought in builders that simply had their eyes on the prize; the stores that had come

in were of no use to the locals and were better suited to Bond Street or Rodeo Drive; the affordable housing promised was to be so far out of London, as to be moot point and the payments to the Council for the leases, barely covered the city's ongoing pension obligations and gave nothing back to the community. But what finally turned her against the project, the company and the area development was Brexit; the Council, when it expected to share in a percentage of the rents, had not thought to build minimum payments into the lease, so when the apartments and stores remained empty, so did the council's bank accounts.

The area was to be destroyed for nothing.

So she became an activist.

She blogged that the area included London's old plague pits.

No one cared.

She produced YouTube videos showing how the area had been the refuge of the poor and the downtrodden through the ages; the 17th century Huguenots, the 18th and 19th Century Irish, Jews and Pakistani's in the 20th Century was finally to be destroyed by and for the wealthy in the 21st century.

And no one cared, because the combined influence of the finance company, the developers, the builders and the council was too powerful, and the local papers applauded the occasional piece of art and community service paid for by the machine. The national papers didn't care at all, after an initial apathetic burst of indignation.

She blogged against government overreach and founded the EyeFreedom Foundation.

In her spare time she liked to roam through government computers.

And, it was she who Amrit called moments before the drone shot him.

Chapter XII

A Lot of Knowledge Can Be a Dangerous Thing

It should have been the start of just another day for Lev Oblomov and his girlfriend sitting in the backseat as their Mercedes Maybach pulled up outside London's Hoxton Grill. Likewise, an uneventful day for the couple enjoying a pre-lunch drink in the bar at Paris' George V, for the Finance Minister in Caracas, the Italian Trade Minister in Guangzhou, the Prime Minister at Chequers and the head of the NSA at a staff meeting in Virginia.

However, the messages that they received on their unlisted phones from their authorized phone contacts weren't authorized, and the contest had officially started.

It was the UK's Prime Minister who reacted first.

"I know that it's not from you Julian. It's an ad for a pizza and some lines from Shakespeare. I just want to know how it got through to me."

"You didn't open the email did you, sir?"

"How else would I know the contents?" The high official not accustomed to being questioned used a rather frustrated tone.

"Please listen carefully, sir. Turn your phone off and take out the sim."

"What? Speak English man. What's a sim?" This time the response was clearly more annoyed.

The PA thought for a moment. "Let's start over, sir. Is there a secretary nearby?"

"Yes, or course there is."

"Good. Now please turn your phone off and have her call me on a landline."

"Hello, Pamela. Please take the PM's phone and place it in your purse. I 'm sending a courier for it, and they will be with you in thirty minutes. His name is Mike. He will show you his identification.

"That afternoon the GCHQ Cheltenham technicians found nothing out of the ordinary. There was no sign that the phone had been cloned. There was no trace of the tracking software or the patch that controlled the sound and video conferencing, As fast as the panic had surfaced, it had subsided and this scenario, with a few variances, was repeated across the globe.

The store of data collected that first few days included the phone numbers of lobbyists, mistresses and gigolos, membership data of gentleman's clubs, and some not so gentlemanly, lists of passwords stored on plain text files, credit account data, photos and massive amounts of cloud data.

As the hours passed, grid systems, nuclear power stations, banks and airline staff were bombarded with the fake email from friends and family members. The email, once opened, locked down systems and generated messages promising Armageddon, unless a ransom was paid. Only the senders and MissyZ knew that no such destruction would take place and the ransom money collected, with a few exceptions, mainly by those who didn't think that they could win the prize, ran into the many thousands of bitcoin.

It was the Knesset that first rang the alarm bell.

As more countries joined in, a secret session of the UN Security Council was called.

The President of the Council tapped the podium, "It would help," started that month's President, "If you stopped

talking to each other and listened to me. I understand that many of us here are under attack, and I have to ask if any of those present suspect that the attacking nation is with us today?"

All eyes turned to the ambassador from the Russian Federation.

The ambassador was infuriated, "Why is it, when anything bad happens in the world, it has to be the Russians?"

"Because it generally is," someone muttered.

"What about the Chinese, or the North Koreans? Doesn't this have their fingerprints all over it?" Bemoaned the Russian Ambassador.

The Chinese ambassador stood to object when the President spoke again. "Please. We need to be together on this. We have what could be the world's complete infrastructure attacked and all we can do is squabble among ourselves. We need to look at this more logically. Have we any reports of a ransom not being paid, and, as a consequence, systems being turned off, or worse, being completely destroyed?"

The consensus was that the ransom being asked in most cases was sufficiently reasonable that it had been paid and there were no reports of system interference past the initial break-ins.

The President continued, "It would seem my friends, that we have dodged a major bullet, and that this should be a solitary lesson for us all. A sobering moment when we all need to decentralize control of our basic, yet imperative, services."

"That's fine," commented the French Ambassador, "But how do we find out who is responsible and bring them to justice?"

"I suspect that we can't. If Europol, the FBI, Scotland Yard, Mossad, the FSB and every other security service has

been unable to identify such past acts, then we simply have to take a deep breath and move on."

The session was called to a halt and the participants broke into mutual-interest factions, outside the chamber, to compare notes in more detail.

NATO and many other countries' military were placed on High Alert as if the next steps expected could include physical invasions.

Washington knew differently.

The Oval Office held no appeal that afternoon, or at any other time to Don McKesson, but that was where he again found himself and this was more serious. This time, also in attendance, were Richard Dauber and the US Ambassador to the UN.

When the stenographer had left the room, as requested by the President, he opened the meeting.

"So tell me," a pause followed, "Why have I taken so many calls asking if the Russians, the Iranians or the North Koreans are attacking us again? Ambassadors, politicians, businessmen, domestic and foreign; in fact all the people that opposed my candidacy are asking, no demanding, answers and I don't have any. And, to top it, I myself received a McDonald's free Happy Meal voucher in my private email. You know how much I love McDonald's, so I clicked on it. Does that mean I've been compromised?"

"You shouldn't have done that Mr. President," Don had the misfortune to say before thinking.

"It shouldn't have gotten through you mean?" Snapped back the Commander in Chief"

"Well, Mr. President, let me start at the beginning."

"I wish someone would Richard, because Don has been very slow coming forward," turning to Don, "I'm very disappointed in you Don."

"Well," continued the colonel, "It would seem that a

bad actor - probably foreign, possibly Eastern European, seems to be targeting local politicians and infrastructure."

"I see. Tell me this then," asked the President changing tack, "Is there any connection to ZEN's surveillance programs?"

"Possibly. ZEN has been asked to research the foibles of a list of world figures."

"Why? Wasn't their remit to just provide us potential threat data in exchange for the marketing rights? What were they going to market to the bad guys?" The president rethought the question, "No, don't answer that."

The Ambassador to the UN gently drew a breath, though clenched teeth, as he started speaking, "I don't understand. This was possibly started by our own people. You want to put all of our partner nations and Congress under the microscope? Have you any idea...?" But he could not complete his thought before he voluntarily stopped, and the President took up the reigns.

"So, let me understand Richard. You have published a list, and that list has been copied, of global targets that the US had in its sites to blackmail?"

"In essence, yes!" Replied the colonel.

"Why would you even consider doing such a thing?"

"If you remember sir, it was your idea. You even suggested a name for the project. You thought that looking for bad behavior that could result in another party blackmailing them could be useful to our interests?" Hearing himself voice this, the career military man had difficulty believing that such a plan was ever viable - let alone advisable.

The President ignored this personal attribution. "Am I a bad guy, Richard? Why was my name on the list, Richard?"

No one dare speak.

"And, who had this list outside you and your staff?"

He asked the colonel.

"I sent it to ZEN for operational purposes," Colonel Dauber replied.

"When was that Colonel Dauber?"

"Last week Mr. President."

"And two days ago, their co-founder and chief scientist was shot by a SWAT team?"

Don McKesson made the mistake of taking up the story, "Well, he was no longer with the company, but, in essence, that's correct sir"

"In essence Don? Are you playing mind games Don?"

"No sir. I apologize. The answer should have been just, 'yes sir.' "

"What else don't I know?" Asked the increasingly annoyed Commander in Chief.

Don McKesson knew that it was time for him to just listen, and the next five minutes were taken up by Colonel Richard Dauber outlining the situation, and, where necessary, he respectfully filled in the details. He passed on explaining the dark web portal that had been ordered to manufacture and promote, that the issue with the scientist had been instigated by the company's Chairman, and that they had unnecessarily terrorized the Santa Barbara Film Festival. He finally admitted that, although the identity of the culprits were known to be an FBI sub-contractor, by the name of Richard de Courcey, and the wife of the Chairman of ZEN, who had personal ties to the Vatican, no one knows their exact whereabouts, and that's despite using the most sophisticated tracking system in the world. The good news, if there is any, is that the infrastructure attacks were suspected to be only superficial and had not penetrated anything of value, and were, more likely than not, a smoke screen for the personal identity attacks. Adding that perhaps that news should be kept in that room.

What was told was sufficient to render the room as

quiet as the grave, waiting for the Leader of the Free World to speak.

And he did.

"Everyone out. Everyone out. Everyone GO NOW!"

The President called for his secretary to have the Director of the FBI come over to see him.

The Director of the FBI declined as politely as she could. It had been a while since the two had met, and it had seldom gone well, so perhaps, a phone call would be wiser. She offered to take his phone call.

"Thank you for being available Maria. It's about time we spoke again, and I'd like to propose a scenario."

"Of course, Mr. President," a cautious Maria Diaz responded.

"What if we were to come into possession of certain, shall we say, information, regarding the illegal activities of businessmen, religious leaders and possibly politicians?"

"What if, what?" Mr. President.

"Could they be useful to the FBI?"

"Not unless they came through a FISA Court warrant."

"What if the information on US citizens came through private means?"

"Are you suggesting that there are also international citizens involved?"

"An NGO might have collected private cloud data or even social media accounts."

"That's stretching the general use of an NGO, Mr. President. And, are you aware that the FBI is simply a domestic agency. In the unlikely scenario that we could use the domestic information, you would still need to speak to Langley about any overseas personas."

"You know what I mean Maria."

"I'm trying not to Mr. President," sarcasm now

entering her voice. "Let's just say not in a million years Mr. President. And whoever thought this up is in for a very rough Senate inquiry ride, and that would be if they survive. And, I mean literally, not politically."

"Why would that be Maria?"

"Do you also know what you are suggesting? Apart from the fact that we have dossiers on everyone we feel is important, so do other nations. And I am certain that if you pose the same question to the CIA, they will tell you the same about overseas nationals and their governments. Let me give you a short lesson Mr. President." Now she was really annoyed. "The world works like a Swiss watch: all parts move and generally everyone knows what to expect from the parts; currencies, imports and exports, borders and everything else that makes the world tick. Every now and again trade or real wars break out, or dictators come to power, some staying and some not. This feeds the military industrial complex, and every other group that are powerful enough to sway society. But, in general, the powerful stay in place and get richer. That is to say that there is a group of the powerful that control the world. They are not megalithic, but fluid, sometimes too fluid, but they are a club. When one person gets out of control, the other club together, work out where best interests lie, and then that person is dealt with. And you would like to declare war on that club Mr. President?"

"Only for the sake of global peace Maria."

"My God! Didn't we learn from what we did in the Middle East? Who is stupid enough to try to collect dirt on everyone?"

The President thought for a moment, "You have expressed my thoughts entirely. There are two, possibly more, rogue actors - one of your own consultants, and a high-ranking ZEN exec."

"Who's the consultant?"

"Roger de Courcey. Do you know him?"

"That sir is an unlikely coincidence. He used to date my sister."

"Have they been in contact lately?"

"I can ask."

"Please do, and as soon as possible." And the President felt that he could finally get ahead of the situation - not using technology, but by his own unique skill set. "I would ask you to keep this to yourself, as national security is at stake here, and you know what that means? Your predecessor failed to grasp what allegiance meant, and he's now an unemployed hack writer."

"You don't have to threaten me sir. I will get back to you as soon as I have spoken to my sister in Mexico City," and she slammed down the phone.

The President smiled to himself. How useful was it that the FBI Director's sister had dated a terrorist? That was definitely one for his back pocket.

Maria Diaz was not smiling, as she dialed her sister's private line.

"How lovely to hear from you," came down the line from Mexico City.

"You might not think so when this call has ended," Maria said ominously. "When did you last speak to Roger de Courcey?"

"Not for years," answered Carmelita Diaz, "knowing that her sister, the Director of the FBI was asking, it was best not to have done so. "Why do you ask?"

"He may be a person of interest in a case that's developing," came the cagey response.

"Maria. It's me you're talking to, not some local DA. Perhaps I can help find him if I know why you're after him. Which I assume you are, and which I assume is urgent; otherwise you would not have called me."

The Director of the FBI told her sister as little as possible about the List, and neither knew about the smokescreen campaign, until a secretary came through on a priority-call- interrupt, and, in a panicked voice, reported that the cooling system one of Diaz Industria's nuclear reactors had been hacked.

"If I manage to locate Roger, I'll call you."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Came the lie and the call disconnected.

Chapter XIII

Paradise Gained

There wasn't a police car in sight as the Diaz Industria jet dropped through the clouds to a view of Bridgetown's runway. Anna was exhausted. She felt like they had been on the run for weeks, even though it had just been two days, but the elation of being in the Caribbean sun, and free from the confines of the slim-bodied jet, that showed on Roger's face was contagious, and Anna broke into smile.

"So far, so good." Anna joked, "Mexico was such an obvious place to hide, I don't think they'll look for us in the Caribbean."

"They were almost right; they just missed the fact that Mexico was only a tech stop," Roger replied, and Anna noticed the element of relief in his voice. He was human after all, she thought.

As the cabin door opened a blast of hot air rushed in and Anna and Roger grinned stupidly at each other.

"Now, Roger, this is where I could hold up."

"We're not out of the woods yet, but after the journey we've had, I'm sure that we could find time for some R&R."

Clearing customs from the executive terminal took less than fifteen minutes, and, within thirty, they were racing through the sugar cane plantations in their rented Mini Moke to the west coast to the parish of St. James.

It was like stepping back in time and into another world. The fragrant air contrasted well against San Jose's smell of money and gasoline, and the sugar cane that helped build an earlier empire still survived long after the orange groves of San Jose's Blossom's Hill had been supplanted by the buildings of the new empire of technology.

It had been many years since Roger had last visited the island and Anna's first trip. It was good to see that it had avoided the fate of Hawaii, which had rapidly become another part of the American culture void; the pineapple and sugar farms having left town for places further East, and the islands littered with strip malls and Walmart and the other soulless businesses that still managed to stay afloat waiting to be sunk by e-commerce.

She and Roger hadn't been off the plane for an hour when already this felt like home. The road-side food stands selling rotis and fresh coconuts, the shanty shops, lean-to houses and the unmade roads that carried so little traffic made it feel calm and relaxed, and, finally, the house that Roger had arranged was almost magical.

The property was storybook Caribbean; a bright white wood-sided bungalow behind a low wall that circled a lush tropical garden. The cottage was just off the two lane highway, five minutes outside Speightstown and backing onto a beach that became a private cove when the tide came in. Palm trees surrounding banana palm and bread fruit trees swayed gently in the wind and the private courtyard that formed the back of the property was less than fifteen feet from the water's edge.

"This place is fantastic! How did you ever find it at such short notice?"

"It belongs to a friend. He said it used to belong to Robert Mitchum."

"You're joking. I've read that the well-connected people that visit Jamaica stay at Ian Fleming's old estate, Golden Eye, but this is much more intimate."

"Sadly, it's where I was staying when I first met Amrit when he was over for Microsoft's Sandy Lane Conference. So the work that we do here has to give some meaning to his death."

"I have to admit Roger that you continually come up with some comment that surprises me. I wouldn't have thought that you felt that way."

"You must think that I'm a bit of a heartless bastard."

"No. Not heartless. Just removed. It's just the impression that you give. You seem to live in the past and without much enjoyment for the present or hope for the future. You should read some of the books written about your wonderful sixties. It may not have been the Shangri La that you think you lost."

Roger was caught off-guard by Anna striking out at him. Had he really given the impression that now, in the present, only the past mattered, because nothing or no one else did?

"It's been a long day Anna. Let's philosophize more tomorrow when we're both less tired. There should be plenty of cold food in the fridge for tonight and our chef will be here tomorrow."

There was plenty of food. There was cold lobster, freshly made salads, bread, cheeses and a bottle of good champagne. And, as they both enjoyed what Roger considered might be a normal meal to Anna, he felt that her unwarranted comments about him had been those of a selfish brat who needed a lesson or two, or even a cold dose

of hardship to give her a reality check. After they finished, Roger rinsed off the plates and put them away and they went to their separate bedrooms.

It was the noise of Anna rifling through the dresser draw, or so he thought, until his eyes focused in the dark to see a head covered in long swinging dreadlocks. "Hey, what are you doing? Get out of here!" and the shape did what it was told. Roger turned on the light to see the mess that the intruder had made and dialed the police from the phone on the bedside table.

"Is the person still in your house?"

"I don't know." Came the reply.

Is anyone else in the house with you?"

"Yes, my daughter."

"Can you talk to her?"

"No. Her room is across a courtyard, and I'm not to sure the burglar has left.

Is the courtyard open to the sky or covered?"

"It's open."

"That's hope he got in. Let's hope he left the same way. Stay in your room and we will be with you in less than five minutes."

"But I must go check to see she's OK."

"That's the worst thing that you could do."

"If she alone, then she's fine. If she's not, then you could makes matters far worse for her."

Roger could hear the sirens well before they reached the house, and he prayed that the intruder had also, and that they'd fled. Anna might be a spoiled brat, but she didn't deserve what was possibly happening behind her bedroom door.

Three smartly dressed Bajan policemen met Roger in the courtyard. Two looked young enough to be cadets and

one, truncheon drawn, went straight through the courtyard, through the kitchen, to the back patio, to look along the beach. The sergeant, a fit looking 60ish sturdily built man, whose head was festooned with a mass of colorful beaded dreadlocks, asked if there had been any sounds from the room that Anna was sleeping in. When he was told that it had been quiet, the officer knocked on her door with his night stick. When there was no response, so he knocked a little louder to hear stirring.

"A good sign, sir," he smiled.

The door opened to a bedraggled half-asleep Anna, a short silk nightdress, with a sleep mask over her hair.

"If you've come to apologize for...." But she stopped, as she saw that Roger was not alone, and her face turned ashen, as she realized that a policeman were standing next to him.

"It's all right Anna, we just had an intruder, but they've gone no, so there's nothing to worry about." Anna wasn't so sure. Seeing the police under any circumstances wasn't a comforting sight. She knew that they would have to show some form of identification and that would likely cascade into a trip back to the US accompanied by at the very least the FBI.

The sergeant seemed to be studying Anna and Roger, and they hoped that he could not read the fear in their faces. He tried to divert any thoughts that might be building. "We only got in this evening, so this is quite a welcome to paradise. Has anyone else reported a robbery tonight?" But before the sergeant could answer the cadet returned to describe what they had found.

"The fridge door was open, sir, and there's food scattered all over the floor."

The sergeant frowned, as he turned to Roger, "That was not a good sign. You're both very lucky sir. And especially you, sir."

Roger tried to think of something humorous to say, but couldn't, so he just looked quizzically at the officer and asked, "How so?"

"Drugs sir. The burglar was high on something which is why they ate first. We don't like to publicize it, but we have a drug problem on the island. It's the tourists that get robbed by the addicts, and the thieves carry machetes and it generally ends badly for anyone who challenges the thief during the robbery."

Roger saw Anna flinch and he instinctively held her close, as her knees started to buckle.

"That's alright Anna, we're alright Anna. It's over now. I'm sure that the sergeant there didn't mean to frighten us. He was just telling us how fortunate we were."

"Quite right Miss. And I'm sorry if I upset you."

"Have you had time to see what's missing?" He now addressed Roger.

"Just a few dollars. I must have heard him, as he was just beginning."

The sergeant was not convinced.

"Are you sure, sir? Once they start, they don't leave without something of more value. It's the fix that's driving them. Well, perhaps you'll check again in the morning. Perhaps you and your daughter can share for the night, though you might not get much sleep, as it'll be light in a few hours."

Anna's face flickered a sign that she wasn't too keen on the idea, but Roger squeezed her hand, to curtail any further reaction, which was just as well, as the sergeant's next words would have engendered an even greater reaction.

"He won't be back, but I'll leave an officer out front and another on the beach just in case."

"Thank you sergeant," a surprisingly comfortable Roger replied.

"I'll just need your passports, so I can send a note to the Home Office for their statistics reporting."

"Of course," replied Roger. "Thankfully you don't have something serious to report."

Roger went back to his bedroom and returned with two UK, less-than-new-looking, passports.

"Father and daughter, Roger and Anna Nolan. Thank you Mr. Nolan. I can only say that I hope that your stay on our island starts to become what you hoped it would be, before this terrible incident happened."

"Thank you sergeant and goodnight." And the door closed to an Anna just able to hold onto her senses.

"Anna Nolan? Where did that come from?" Her voice full of relief. "So, that's what you were doing in that print shop in Ojai. You have some interesting friends."

"I told you that I'd protect us. We needed cover, so I arranged some. There was no way that we could travel as ourselves."

"Do you think that we have a problem?"

"No. If you mean the robbery? That was just bad luck. But I'm not sure about the sergeant. The look on his face suggested that his thoughts were not on the robbery."

"We could have been killed, and perhaps he didn't need a murder on his hands."

"That's possible?"

"Let's call it a night, or morning, shall we?"

"I'll take the sofa on the patio, and you try to get a couple of hours."

"You'll never sleep on the patio. The sun will be up soon, and the only air conditioning is in the bedrooms. My bed's a double, and we've become friends. And I need a friend tonight."

As Roger lay next to Anna he could feel her shiver, and he knew that it was not the air conditioning that was causing it, as fierce as it was. She was scared. As he lay

watching a spider slowly cross the ceiling towards an unknowing fly, he wondered if their luck had run out.

Sergeant Collin George Braithwaite, one of Barbados's finest, had lived in Hammersmith, West London since aged five and had only been back on the island for a year. His interests were varied, but his love was technology. Having taught himself to write computer code, within a year he had been selling games through small ads in Computer Weekly. Within two years his company, Hammer Games, employed twelve programmers, and he had a partner: a money man who would keep the ship off the rocks. He'd take care of the money. And he did. In the company's fifth year, the partner having convinced George that the company was losing money, he bought the outstanding stock for a song. Then he sold it to a California venture fund. George was fired and after almost two decades of trying to start over, the pull of the Caribbean's sunshine and crystal blue waters in his DNA brought him home. Once back, he put to one side his dreams and joined the Royal Barbados Police Force. But he still loved technology, and he recognized Roger de Courcey when he saw him. Even if de Courcey was traveling under another name.

"Just copy and file these, constable," Sergeant Braithwaite instructed his constable, as he handed over Roger's and Anna's passports. "Register them and let me have them back. We're unlikely to catch whoever it was, and the sooner normality returns for them the sooner they can get back to enjoying their vacation."

The late morning wall of tropical air gushed into what now seemed an icy-cold bedroom, as Anna opened the door. She had, despite the night's chaos, lulled by the gentle lapping of the ocean, managed to sleep for a number of hours. In fact, apart from mildly craving a cup of coffee, she

found herself remarkably cheerful. Setting up the patio table before making up two plates of fruit for breakfast, she waited for the percolator to perform before she woke Roger, who blearily-eyed joined her at the table.

"You slept?" He asked.

"I did, thanks."

A cruise ship came into view on the horizon, and Roger gestured at it with his toast. "What a view?" He said enthusiastically.

"Adam and I used to see this kind of view all the time from the ocean, but it seems even more impressive from the land."

"You do know that that part of your life has gone, probably for good?"

Anna thought for a moment. "That's okay. When I told you that I'd become disenchanted, I meant it. Technology doesn't help people, it enslaves them. I know because I've seen it from the inside. That's why I'm doing this, I mean, we're doing this. Also, it's fine if I'm Anna Nolan today, but if this goes wrong, I can't just stay Anna Nolan forever - she doesn't exist."

"That's not strictly true. When the FBI hired me for the NSA work they had to give me all sorts of system privileges to monitor the comings and goings of suspected terrorists and that included access to passport records, including witness protection. So, Anna Nolan does exist - and she has a past."

"And, she lives, where exactly?" The question was left hanging.

"Anywhere she wants to." He paused.

"And she's rich. Well, strictly speaking, we're rich. The cellphone Amrit gave me had his Bitcoin key scratched into the case."

"Amrit gave you a billion dollars?"

"Possibly more. We were to share the code and either

one of us could access the cash. There's plenty of it, and now that Amrit's gone, it's ours."

The reference to 'ours' had a ring to it that Anna was unsure about. Roger was a solid decent guy, but did she want to stick with a crazy hippy radical, even one with expensive tastes. Was this repeating a mistake of being number two in someone's life - even if there was no romantic involvement. She let the comment stand without a reaction.

But the lack of reaction was noticed.

"Don't get the wrong idea, Anna, this is not a vacation, and we're not running away from the world. It's a sanctuary. A base to operate from with a satellite link, with an automatic switching virtual private network so it can't be traced. And, you're young enough to be my daughter, possibly my granddaughter, so please don't get the wrong idea. Sure, you're beautiful, and you're intelligent, but that would be a disaster for both of us. So let's stick to business."

A now slightly pensive, Anna agreed. As much as it was also how she wanted things to be, she still felt rejected. And, for her, rejection was not a familiar feeling.

"As for what we do here, we go after wrecking VALHALLA as planned. Amrit appointed someone I knew in London to referee the game. Anyway, I assume that he did, because I'm on the rules circulation list."

"You're still receiving messages? Is that clever?" The anxiety showed in her voice.

"My fallback phone is the untraceable Blackberry favored by drug dealers before they were shut by the authorities." He kept MissyZ's name out of his response. "The way hacker groups work is that no one knows anyone else. And names change often. It's safer that way, and there are no stars and no celebrities."

"So, what part do we play?" The keenness in Anna's voice showed.

"I don't suppose a nice girl like you has any hacking skills?" He laughed as he completed the sentence.

"I used *Hashcat* at college and that wasn't that long ago, so I'd say that I was pretty competent."

"Then, unless there's something else you think we should be doing, I'll download the names of the targets, and you can start."

Anna wasn't so sure that this was a good use of her time. "I'd rather try to work out who killed Amrit and who is behind VALHALLA, because I still can't believe it's the US government."

"How would you get started?"

"I'd start with talking to Adam."

"Are you crazy? Why would he talk to you? Sure, he's not going to know where the call came from, but really what's the point?"

"Because he's one of them."

"Do you miss Adam? Wish we'd never started?"

"Far from it. Do you know how lucky we are to have come across something so evil, before it's really taken hold?" And, with the crystal blue Caribbean not ten feet away, she moved her coffee cup to one side and flicked open her laptop and began trawling the internet, looking for big fish to fry.

"That's good to hear," said Rodger. "I need to go get some cash for us, so I'll be back in about an hour. Don't forget to keep yourself hydrated. There's plenty of water in the fridge."

Then, Anna heard the Moke start and drive away.

No sooner had Roger left then there came a knock at the door and a broadly smiling sergeant Braithwaite, his full figure filling the door frame, extended his hand to shake Anna's. "I thought that I would return your passports in person. I saw your father's Las Vegas speech on YouTube,

Anna. I hope you don't mind me calling you Anna, and I thought it inspirational. I'm only sorry that you had the experience last night and don't think of it as your welcome to paradise."

"No, calling me Anna's fine. Can I offer you a coffee or something?"

"A beer would be excellent if you have one?"

"I'm sure that we have something in the fridge. It was stocked pretty well."

Anna kept talking as she went to the fridge and took out a bottle of Banks beer, which she opened and handed to him.

"You didn't have to come personally. I 'm sure that you're a busy man."

Sergeant Braithwaite took a long sip, which looked like he needed.

"Not at all. We're a pretty sleepy place, with only the occasional pick pocket. Some jewelry lost on the beach. A tourist or two enjoying a bit too much local rum, which is very good, you know, for the local economy. Other than that it's rather routine."

"But, I'm more interested in what brings you and your father to our lands." As he spoke, he looked around the room and noticed Anna's lap top screen. "I see that you also program. Isn't that a password cracker you've got open?"

Anna was shocked. "Is it? Oh that's Dad's laptop, and the reference to Roger seemed extremely strange on her lips. He's probably just keeping his hand in."

"Is he here working on the FBI hack? You probably can't tell me, and I'm sorry I asked. It's just that the place has been crawling with MI6, so I assumed that something was going on."

Anna was concerned that they'd landed in a hornet's nest.

"The FBI is here?"

"Everyone is here looking into the unusual, but aptly named LobbyShop. I say everyone, but not the owner, Lev Oblomov. He's in London, and the office is just manned by an English husband and wife. That's why, I assumed, you're in town."

Anna had no real answer, but she answered, "We're on an unauthorized MI6 mission. The FBI do not know that we are here. So..."

"I understand completely. Your whereabouts are completely safe with me." He thought for a moment. "Is it possible that last night's event was not a simple robbery? Could they have been looking for something else, which would explain the lack of violence?"

Now Anna was unnerved.

"I was a programmer some years ago, so any help that I could give you....." He tailed off his sentence, "...not that it's likely Roger will need any, but he just has to ask. Who knows, perhaps we can help each other."

Anna noticed an attitude in his voice, but didn't know him well enough to translate its meaning.

"That's kind of you sergeant. I'll pass it on." Anna was still thinking about last night. "Perhaps you'll let us know if anyone is found to be our intruder."

"Please call me, Collin." And he handed the passports to a concerned Anna. She wondered what he knew, and why an on-duty policeman was drinking during the day?

Chapter XIV

Data Day Activities

Checking the private server, to view the first four days of data-scrape, delivered by the hackers, was a harrowing experience for MissyZ. Personal experience had shown her that those in power often could not be trusted, testosterone playing such a part in success, but even she was appalled at the number of mistresses and gigolos and illicit bank accounts that existed. And the insider trading deals palled next to the number of nominee stocks, bonds, and illicit property ownership and she seriously began to wonder who would be able to exercise any authority over those who currently made the rules and then broke them; who could change anything if everyone in power was on the take or the make. If global oil and precious metals' prices, along with commodity and currency fluctuations, were manipulated, as if the world was one huge monopoly board, which is what it had become, where was a William Tell or a Robin Hood to be found?

It was time to reconnect with Roger.

She knew there was a risk in calling his phone direct, but she decided that needs' must, so she did, and, knowing not to mention names, the conversation was not a positive one.

"We have to stop what we're doing."

"Why?"

"It's scale has become alarming."

"In what way?"

"Simply put, so far there's not a completely clean person. Whether it's money, and, trillions are involved, mistresses, secret second families, or anti-social tendencies; it doesn't look very healthy out there?"

"And so?"

"I'm too young to die."

"Be serious."

"I am. I can't be Sancho Panza to your Don Quixote when it's more likely to end up as Guernica."

"That's too much of a mixed metaphor, but I understand. What are you thinking of doing?" Asked Roger.

"Not sure yet, but another problem that we might have is some of 'our friends' are becoming too enthusiastic. They've hacked into power stations, grid systems, mass transit systems, banks and even charities. One clown actually hacked into 99c Store Inc. Asking for a million dollars to free up their register system; its a bloody free for all and it shows signs of getting worse. Sure I've told everyone to stop, and I hope for God's sake that they do. I've also told everyone to destroy their collection and the list and to take a vacation. A long vacation."

"Have you destroyed your set?"

"Not yet. I may need it to do a deal. Think about what to do next, and I'll try to call you tomorrow, and then we shouldn't contact each other again. Unless, I find a reason to stay in, and its going to have to be a bloody good reason, I'm out."

And the line went dead.

"Who was that" asked Anna.

Roger's face was ashen.

"Our organizer, he replied, not mentioning name or place. "She says that the information coming in for the most part isn't worth anything, so I think that she wants to quit."

Roger explained that even though the data wasn't very important, because they'd assisted the hacking, they were at an even greater risk - and not just from the FBI. Again, they needed to move and quickly. And, they had another problem; no way did they want to see any of the data, but there was no way they could convince anyone that

they hadn't seen it.

"What the hell to do is the question." And, as he said the last statement, Anna came up with a possible solution.

"We need someone untouchable to act as an intermediary for us."

"Who would you suggest?" Roger asked sarcastically. "God?"

"In a way, yes! The Vatican."

Roger thought the idea was ridiculous, until Anna explained that her brother was as close to the Pope, as anyone could be.

"I get it, but after all my years as an atheist, or at least an agnostic, it's going to be difficult for me to reconcile working with such a heavy duty religious entity."

"They do some good," countered Anna. "I know, because I know my brother. It's still a long-shot, and if you let me use your Blackberry, I could see if he's interested in becoming involved."

Roger said nothing, but thought to himself that, after MissyZ's call, he knew he was lost and out of his depth. They still had Braithwaite to deal with, who obviously wanted something from them.

"He could turn us in, if we don't help him," Roger said in a hesitant voice.

"So let's have him over for drinks, and we'll just ask him what he wants?"

That seemed a good place to leave it, so Roger said, "I'm going for a swim. Want to join me?"

"I don't have a bathing suit and it's not the sixties, Anna said with hesitation."

"I'll look the other way, and I'll swim along the coast."

Anna looked uneasy. "I was also thinking about strangers."

Roger laughed, "Well, Miss Prude, let's go into town

and buy some swimsuits."

"That's a better idea."

"And then we can invite our friendly policeman over for drinks."

It was mid afternoon when Sergeant Braithwaite walked around the cottage to join Roger and Ann on the beach. Out of uniform, barefoot and in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts, he sat down in the sand, as if he were home. He came straight to the point.

"I think that I can help you Roger."

"How so, and why would I need help?"

"Any chance of a beer - I was up most of the night chasing a drug dealer half way around the island?"

"Of course. Anna would you please oblige the sergeant."

"Call me Collin, please..." Anna heard as she approached the cottage's white picket fence, and then the negotiations began.

"OK Collin, exactly why is it that you think we need your help?"

"Protection from ZEN. Or, more precisely protection from Anna's husband, the Chairman of ZEN. After all, you are here with his wife. You should have known that her face was too well known to be able to pass her off as anyone else. Even if you have gone to the trouble of creating a fake passport; a serious crime by the way. Not that I blame you. She is quite lovely."

Roger was not sure what to make of Collin's opening statement, other than his blackmail was as unexpected, as it was wrong.

"What is it you'd like from us, I mean me?" He asked.

Collin explained how his partner had, in his words, shafted him, and it was time to get even. Roger was to destroy him financially; hack into his bank accounts, his

stock portfolio, ruin his hotel business, and do whatever else it took.

Anna heard the tale-end of the conversation, as she returned with three condensation-dripping beers.

"Are you crazy? You're a policeman asking us to commit a serious crime."

Roger reacted quickly, "He knows about us Anna," Following it with, "He knows that we're cheating on Adam."

Anna was stunned, and, saying nothing, she looked down at the sand and then up at Roger.

"Why don't we just give you the money that he stole from you?"

Collin wasn't interested, "No. It's the principle. Anyway, were talking millions?"

"How many millions?"

Collin recalculated the loss quickly and came up with two million. Just over twice what had been stolen from him."

"But we..." Started Anna.

"You two must really be crazy about each other to pay that kind of money to keep me quiet. Let me think about it."

This wasn't what he'd expected, but all three of them knew that it was going to be difficult to turn down that kind of offer.

"I'll get back to you," and with a smile on his face he handed the half empty bottle back to Anna and strolled down the beach.

"What the hell was that all about? So much for being able to hide safely."

"I can't help it if your face is all over the celebrity websites."

Anna ignored his comment, "So what now?"

"We pay him, that's what now. Firstly he knows who we are, and, secondly, the thief cleared us out of cash, and our policeman friend could be useful. We have three

prepaid debit cards each with \$100,000 on them, but if we need actual cash, we could be stuck. And, as I can't access our Bitcoin account, without a bank account, Collin will have to access his when we pay him."

"Can't we just do what he wants?" Asked Anna.

"Sure, we can raid his ex-partner's bank account, but he's not likely to have much cash lying around to give to Collin. And, as for ruining the guy, how would we do that?"

"What about implicating him in some crime?"

"And, how would you suggest doing that Anna?"

"I'm sure someone as bright as you can come up with a way."

"Well... We could drop a file or two on his computer."

"Doesn't that make us as bad as him?" Anna asked.

"It's a bit late for moral qualms. And yes, it does, but it'll get us out from under Collin's threat, and we still need to use his bank account to can get the cash we need."

Anna was still uncertain. "I don't trust anyone who drinks during the day. Especially before noon."

"Well you'd not have had any friends in London - how do you feel about drugs?"

"They're really stupid."

"Just like that?"

"So, California legalizing grass was an error?"

"No, it was a huge mistake. I agree with whatever politician it was that said that, 'Californians don't need help getting any more stupid'."

Thankfully for Roger, the discussion was interrupted by his phone vibrating with a curt request from MissyZ to call her again. This time he drove into Speightstown where he called her using an encrypted phone app, on a thumb drive, which he inserted into their PC.

This time there was more urgency in her voice. "After we spoke, I really tried to find away to carry on, but now I'm definitely out. Everyone, but everyone, is on the make or the

take. And, you won't believe how stupid some of these people are - the information is up on the cloud; they must think themselves invincible."

"Wasn't that what we're after?"

"Yes, but as I already told you, I really didn't expect such volume. There will be no one left to enforce anything, if we go after everybody."

"Can we prioritize?"

"You're not listening. They all seem to know each other. It's like ancient Rome; anything goes among friends."

"There must be a way. Text me again in a few days."

"That's not good enough, I'm afraid. I'm out and if I was you I'd do the same."

"You're quitting?"

"As of now. This is a fool's errand. I've worked for corporations that bought people, and what we're looking at here is a thousand times worse. Stop now Roger, if you can. You don't have to stop preaching about how great the 60's were, and how it all went wrong." There was no sarcasm in her voice. "But please pick a battle that you can win."

"OK, I understand. So, do one last thing for me, and it might actually help us by clouding the water."

And, he gave MissyZ instructions about how he wanted Collin Braithwaite's ex-partner to be dealt with.

Roger now found himself the project leader; gathering data for a project that was explosive and dangerous to even know about, and, wanting to quit, but not knowing how.

Chapter XV

An Unlucky Break

As Anna swam in the warm waters off the cottage, it reminded her of how just a week or so earlier she had been snorkeling off their boat moored in Maui. It almost felt like her old life of luxury, except for the Secret Service chasing her, and strange conversations with corrupt and possibly crazy policeman. And, things were about to change yet again.

"We may have a hit sir," called the GCHQ researcher to his supervisor. "A police sergeant in the Caribbean just received over two million dollars from a Bitcoin account. It showed on a routine scan of transactions, and on its own it's extremely suspicious, but an earlier signal to watch Caribbean company activities reported a Diaz Industria jet landed on the same island, with a man and his daughter on board, who answer the description of two American HS targets. Should we copy our American Cousins in?"

"Not yet. Let's get a fuller picture," responded his superior. "Get me the history on the target; then we'll see if it's just money laundering."

When the ball started to roll, it swept up all sorts of information. At first glance Sergeant Collin Braithwaite seemed like an ordinary working stiff, but as the onion was peeled, his software connection was revealed, and then his bankruptcy. So why some years later should he be the lucky recipient of such a large sum, much of which he then withdrew in cash? Was there a connection to their LobbyShop investigation? Was he their paymaster? They needed to go into Collin's associate's past.

Initially the partner was seen to be a South Wales hotelier who sold his previous company to an American Corporation in the mid-80's, but his bank account also showed a receipt of a million dollars in proceeds from a bitcoin account, and an inspection of his cloud storage produced a list of world leaders and their personal email

addresses. And, it was at this point that the alarm bells rang, and then a call was made to a Washington number that was not in the Homeland Security department.

The journey from Cardiff to West London was not a comfortable one for Dennis Badge. Hooded and shackled, having been arrested at 4:00 AM by the SWAT team that had neither bothered to ring his hotel's night bell, nor read him his rights, because at that time he had none, was bundled into a black SUV and driven at speed to an anonymous looking four-story house.

Seated uncomfortably, the hood now removed, in a straight back chair in the middle of an otherwise bare room, he was duck-taped and wired, as he had seen in TV films, and he was scared out his wits. Also, in the room were three men in dark suits, one carrying a clipboard, who looked more like businessmen than kidnappers.

"Who are you?" His voice now hoarse from having asked the same question over and over again, during the one hundred and fifty mile ordeal. "Why are you doing this to me? Does my wife know where I am. There has to be some mistake."

"When did you last see, or speak, or have any contact, with the LobbyShop?"

"I don't have any hobbies, so why would I go to a hobby shop." As the last syllable of the last word fell from his tired lips, the clipboard was brought crashing down against his ear.

"Don't get funny with us." Suit number one was not amused, and he asked, "Who is your contact at the 'LobbyShop?" Taking his time to pronounce 'lobby' and adding the location, Barbados.

"I've never been to, or know anyone, in the Caribbean." And, he now knew that there had been a mistake, but feared that it didn't matter. He reasoned that

kidnappers must deal harshly with snatching the wrong person, especially if they had not covered their faces.

Another of the businessmen asked, "What about Collin Braithwaite?" And Dennis flinched.

"So, that's what this is about. What's he been telling you? I didn't cheat him. He was a drunk that lost his edge. He damaged himself, and if it hadn't been for me, we'd both would have lost everything. I had always half expected Collin to try to get even, but this is ridiculous. How much does he want from me?" He watched the clipboard twitch and then relax.

"When did you communicate with him last?"

"Decades ago."

"So who is your contact at LobbyShop? Who sent you the files and the payment? What were you supposed to do?"

"What files? What cash? Please don't hit me again. I genuinely don't understand the questions."

The suits made eye contact, as if to say there was no point in continuing, as there was a danger in them sharing information that should not be shared, and, without a word, they left the room.

Outside the room, the businessmen shared their concern.

"This isn't going as planned. I can't see this guy as a spy," said the one with the clipboard.

"Nothing even close to it," said another.

"So what now?" Asked the third suit.

"Our job's done," said the senior handler who'd been watching the room through a series of monitors that showed different angles of the prisoner's face, while monitoring his biorhythms. "We just report back, and upstairs will decide whether we can let him go."

"When are we going to interview Braithwaite?" Asked the first trainee.

"That's going to happen locally by a team in place,

who's already going through LobbyShop with a fine tooth comb."

It was late afternoon at the Sandy Lane Hotel and the patio staff were setting up for Mr. Magic's Flaming Limbo attraction. The house reggae band was singing, 'I Shot the Sheriff' for the third time that afternoon, and had been joined by a Ska singer from South London who was on vacation.

It was a reasonable 81 degrees, and it was the combination of the sunshine, warm air and a couple of beers that made Collin Braithwaite's interrogation seem more like a meeting of old friends more than an MI6 grilling. Congenial and partly shaded from the potentially harmful rays of the sun, by a colorful beach umbrella, the group's conversation flowed easily, and without the help of a clipboard.

"So, Collin, when did you last speak to your partner Dennis?" Asked the male agent who, dressed in a sea island cotton shirt and shorts and after only a month on the island, had begun to feel like a native.

"That's easy to remember. It was just after my birthday in 1990. The bastard invited me to dinner at Harvey's. The Michelin-star owner, Marco Pierre White, joined our table and drank most of our expensive bottle of champagne. The bastard stuck me with the bill - many hundreds of pounds, and it took me over a year to pay my credit card down? Suppose I can't really blame him though - perhaps I was a bit pissed - I used to drink a lot," he said taking a swig from his bottle of Banks.

He smiled.

"Why do you ask? Hopefully, he's cheated someone else and you want to lock him up. He was a bad'ne. Cheated me out of a fortune." And he gave them a potted version of his life story.

"So he wasn't a programmer?" The female agent asked who, in a shawl covering her bikini, also felt quite at home.

"That's an unusual question. But when I knew him, he was just business - had no idea what a program was, let alone being able to write one. I used to program, but once we took on a few kids who were magic at programming, I became our marketing director. That's where it went wrong. I took my eye off the company and just let him run the money-end of the business."

"If I said that we suspected him of being involved with some form of computer blackmail?" Asked tanned agent O'Hara.

"I'd have to say that anything was possible. Once a bad man, always a bad man." Hearing this was like a choir of angels singing to Collin, and he was happy to lay this on with a trowel. "And, it really wouldn't surprise me."

Then came the question that he shouldn't have been expecting.

"Where did the two and a half million dollars that just hit your bank account come from?"

But Collin was ready. "Talk about luck, I bought Bitcoin back in 2009 when it first launched. They each cost me less than three thousandths of a dollar. I must have been drinking when I did it. I forgot about them until I was looking for a photograph in an old laptop and came across the key. It was like winning the lottery. My only regret is not finding it three months ago - they would have been worth twice as much."

"I don't mean to doubt you Collin, but you wouldn't have a record of the transaction would you?"

"Probably, somewhere, I'm sure I do, but I had been drinking, so I'll have to look." And both parties knew that even if he did, the beauty of Bitcoin was that the transactions were untraceable.

"How about another beer, guys? On me, as I can afford it now. And it's always nice to meet representatives of the British Government. I can't tell you how many happy years I spent on *your* island."

"Thanks for the offer, but we have to report in." And the sun flooded onto their stern faces, as they moved away from under the umbrella.

Some distance way from the table, agent O'Hara asked, "Is he for real, or what? Cos I think he's fucking us around."

"Yes he is, but there's no proof, and he knows it, so we'll just have open a book on him. He's on his turf, and he's one of the island's finest. So we'll just have to wait. If he's involved, he'll make a mistake. They all do when they know they're being watched. Their actions become too careful, too unnatural."

As the agents left, Collin ordered another beer, and then another, until he felt pleasantly high, without being completely drunk. It puzzled him why his ex-partner should be considered a programmer and how he's become connected with blackmail, of all things. That wasn't Dennis' speed, at least when he knew him. Then he realized what must have happened: Roger had happened. Did he care? No. Well, not about Dennis anyway. The bastard deserved it. So that was that. Or was it? Here he was, back in paradise and rich. Rich by his standards anyway. He looked around at who else was at the hotel. The wealthy tourists and business people from around the world. Some, just tourists, hoping to catch a glimpse of Paul McCartney, or some equally famous celebrity - even John Belushi would have done, had he still been alive. This resort was not the sort of place that Canadian women came to just to spend a few days with some hot local guy. This was the place for beautiful girls who were looking for a pick-up, with a future - some overweight tycoon - not some fat local policeman,

who had just been called to the luxury location for an MI6 interrogation. He'd lose weight, he'd buy a house on the island and He fell asleep.

He was abruptly awakened by a woman from Manchester whose husband seemed to have enjoyed too much rum punch."

"You can't drive in that state George. You don't know the car or the roads well enough," she stated emphatically, with more than a little distress in her voice.

George tried to argue that their villa was less than a mile away, but couldn't quite find conviction in his voice, so they ordered a pot of coffee, and he agreed to wait for Mr. Magic's dusk show.

Still half groggy from sleep and the couple of pints of Banks, Collin paid his bill in cash and headed on foot up the coast to Roger and Anna's cottage.

"What brings you here?" Asked Anna, not particularity pleased to see her blackmailer, and, noticing on his breath, the unpleasant odor of stale beer.

"I just met with two MI6 agents, who wanted to ask me when I last met Dennis Badge?" He left the question mark hanging, waiting for Anna to respond.

But she didn't.

"They asked me if I knew anything about his international blackmail activities?"

"Well, that's ironic." She said with a slight sneer. And, she meant it, as Roger hadn't discussed the arrangement he'd made with MissyZ.

Collin was a little surprised at her reaction and began to wonder if this had anything to do with his deal with them.

"You didn't set him up?"

"Set who up? Go home and sleep it off, Collin, and if you've something to say when you sober up, come back and we'll talk."

And, Anna closed the door.

Collin really wasn't feeling that bright after the beer and the sleep, so perhaps Anna had been right to turn him away. He would probably have just made a fool of himself. So, he started to walk back to Speightstown where he'd have another beer or two, before going to bed. He had walked just a few paces and was barely aware of headlights, before the Jeep flipped him, cartoon like, into the air landing with a soft thud between a banana plant and a breadfruit tree.

It was early morning when the phone rang, in the hallway, in a upscale South London terrace house.

"What do you mean, he's dead?" Asked their section leader. "You interrupt my breakfast meeting with your tale of complete bloody incompetence, to tell me that the target's dead? You only met with him two hours ago, and he was fine then. Wasn't he? Why weren't you watching him?"

Agent O'Hara had no real answer. It wouldn't have been a good career move to admit that they had both enjoyed the beer and ambiance of the island so much, that they had been sitting in their car watching a huge cruise ship pass in front of an amazing sunset. So she lied, "We had to go for petrol and by the time we caught up to him he was just lying by the side of the road."

The line went quiet.

"So the killer was either on the patio with you, or waiting outside. Did you notice anyone watching you talk to him? Frankly, anything, just anything you can tell me would be helpful, as I have to tell upstairs about this cock-up."

"We think that he was lying to us about his connection with Badge. It was all too smooth. It seemed rehearsed. The bastard was half smiling as he spoke, almost laughing at us. He obviously didn't feel that he was in danger."

"That'll do for the moment. BUT if you think of anything else... No matter what time you think of it, call

me."

And the harassed, and soon to be embarrassed, mid-level company man, now had to go back to his breakfast meeting determined to salvage some of the morning's agenda, before going into the office where he knew he was in for a right bollocking.

On his way back to his dining room he texted a Washington phone number, with an update with what should have been a positive result...

Chapter XVI

Time to Move On, Again

As the commotion started, Anna and Roger were relaxing on the terrace having watched the sunset, while enjoying a glass of wine. Not wanting to start discussing her thoughts on Collin's character, Anna hadn't mentioned turning him away when he came to talk. As more and more people gathered, and voices became raised, and the gathering became too loud to ignore, they walked around the side of the cottage to see what was going on.

Expecting to see a group of local Rasta having a party, under the trees, they were surprised to find three police jeeps and a dozen uniformed officers, walkies-talkies in hand, talking to their neighbors. When an officer motioned to the body lying half in the undergrowth Anna didn't need to see the face. She recognized the ugly shirt as the one that Collin had been wearing, and that meant that not only was their banker gone, but the investigation into his death would turn up their presence on the island.

She turned to Roger, and in a mix of fear and anger,

said, "MissyZ has quit because she sees that we're attempting the impossible and just committing suicide," and, gesturing over at the body, she said, "and now we know *they* know where we are. I can't do this anymore. People are getting killed and we're likely to be next."

"How do you know that's Collin?" Roger asked.

"I recognize the shirt he was wearing when he came to the cottage earlier. He was drunk, and I turned him away."

"You did what? Perhaps he'd have lived if you'd let him in?"

"Or, perhaps we'd all have died. Anyway, I don't like drunks. The point is we have to stop this, and stop it now."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" Roger replied calmly as he'd been expecting to hear her voice something similar ever since she joined him at the underground garage in San Francisco.

"I'm going to call Colonel Dauber."

"I'd think twice about that if I was you. Like it or not, you've been part of the data harvest, and IF you have a trial, they'll lock you up for life. And, if they don't bother with a trial you could have an accident like our friend here? I agree things are out of control, but we need to have a bargaining chip before we talk to anyone back in the US. You thought that your brother might be able to help? If you still do, then call him, and I'll call Carmelita Diaz and see if transport could be made available."

Roger thought for a moment and then gently touched Anna's arm.

"You should also know that you're right to say what you did. We just need to get out of this alive."

Anna felt more than a little relieved that the nightmare could be lessening. Not completely over, but at least Roger now realized that what they had attempted had been irrational, if not plain stupid. Over the last few days it

had slowly, but firmly, dawned on her that what they had become involved in was simply Natural Selection; Darwin's Theory of Survival of the Fittest and not necessarily an evil Government plan. Being on the run with Roger had taught her that, sure he was a survivor, but perhaps she was not; if he was a bank during a financial crisis, or a homeowner during an earthquake, or any other form of shipwreck, he would survive. He was who you'd want with you if you had to cross a desert - but then, the probability was that he'd be the only one to come out alive and that's what scared her to the point that she had to stop.

Anna started to turn towards the cottage. "Let's go in while the police are busy. They'll get around to us later, and when they do, we need to have our story straight."

Back on the terrace the wine no longer seemed like a good idea. A clear head was called for and Roger was at an usual loss.

He texted Carmelita Diaz, 'Hello,' but not receiving an instant reply, he knew that something was wrong.

Anna read his face, "So that door is closed. Any other ideas?"

"Let's call it a day. We'll feel fresher after a good night's sleep." But he knew that not to be the case. They were stuck, and Anna was right. The police would come and question them, simply as a routine part of the investigation, especially as they were on a previously filed burglary sheet, and that's probably where he had been heading when he had been hit. And, if there were any inconsistencies, with what Collin had entered in the crime log, they'd want to know why.

But Roger was in no mood to sleep. He'd liked to have had a drinking buddy to talk things through with, but Anna had gone to bed. He grabbed a four-pack of beer from the fridge and went back out to the terrace to think. After a while the commotion was replaced by the sound of cicadas

and the gently lapping Caribbean, and he started to drift off.

He was awakened after a few minutes to the odor of marijuana drifting towards him, and it was quickly followed by a barefoot Rasta in a dirty T-shirt and torn shorts. A net containing a number of coconuts attached to a pole was slung over his shoulder.

"Fresh coconuts?" Offered the vendor over the short patio wall, as he took out an old soggy dark brown coconut that had obviously been in the sea and was now inedible.

"I'm good," answered Roger.

"C'mon man, this is a great coconut. Or I got some fine Vincy if you're in the mood"

Roger thought for a moment. He'd not smoked weed since the 80's, and maybe this would be a a good time for some more.

"Okay, I'll take some weed, but pass on the coconut."

"That be twenty dollars man," the Rasta said with a smile, as he watched Roger peel off a note from a rolled bundle that he took out of his pocket.

The Rasta pocketed the bill and squatted on the sand in front of the low wall.

Roger offered him a beer.

"That no good for you man," came the rebuttal, "This sacred herb is what's best."

"Where do you live?"

"Around?"

"Around here?"

"Yes.

"How would you like to earn a hundred dollars a day?"

"American?"

"Yes

"Is it legal?"

"Yes"

"That a lot of money for something legal."

"Just keep a lookout for me. I'm here with another man's wife, and he's looking for us. He's not likely to look on this island but, if he does, I want to know before he sees us. It's that easy."

"Will he be carrying?"

"Carrying?"

"Yes, carrying a gun."

"Roger didn't know who would turn up, or how many, and yes seemed the true answer.

"No," he answered.

"How long will you need me for?"

"Maybe a week, maybe more, maybe less."

"Then, yes."

Eric introduced himself, and the two men shook on the deal. Roger gave him a hundred dollars in advance.

Roger put his beer down and they both lit up and Roger experienced a peace that had evaded him, or perhaps he hadn't needed the other few times he had tried the sacred herb.

A couple of hours had passed before Roger woke, his stomach was empty and his mouth was desert-dry. Eric was sitting on the sand looking out at the horizon.

Instinctively, Roger touched his pocket where the roll of bills were, and they were still there.

"I'm an honest man. All us Rasta are honest. A deal is a deal. Now if I were you, I'd go join that fine looking girl of yours in bed."

"Thank you Eric. I think I will." And he stood somewhat unsteadily and went to his own room.

It was late morning when Roger went out to the patio again. Eric had just washed his dreadlocks in the sea and was lashing them against the sand to shake out the excess moisture.

"All's quiet," said Eric, as Anna came to the patio in

her bikini, under a thin shawl.

"Why are you talking to that local?" She asked in a not very pleasant tone.

"Eric. I'd like you to meet Anna."

And then he turned to Anna.

"Eric's keeping an eye on the cottage for us, just in case any strangers turn up." And he smiled at Eric, as Anna was looking away.

"Hi Eric. Nice to meet you," she said, but Eric was not convinced.

"Why don't you go take a break for an hour or so Eric," said Roger.

Eric got the message.

"Back around lunchtime," he said as he strolled away humming a tune.

"Well, did you come up with a solution?" Anna asked pointedly.

"Well, yes and no. It depends on whether your brother can get us out of here and into Rome."

"As I already said, I can try. I already mentioned VALHALLA to him when I first came across it."

"Did you mention Dauber, or just ZEN's part?"

"Just ZEN."

"Good! So call him and now tell him about the rest, and my bet is he'll really want to see us - if we have the files."

Roger had been brought up as a member of the Catholic Church, and, although he'd soured on organized religion long before he was twenty, he'd continued to follow their scandals down the decades from Roberto Calvi, Gods' Banker, found hanging under London's Blackfriars Bridge, to the Magdalene Sisters' atrocities in Ireland and the selling of 'unwanted' Catholic babies to Americans. He knew that the Church would love to get even with the world - to show that it had been, and was still not, alone in corruption.

He also suspected that, given the chance, this Pope would like to effect change in the world; change for the poor and the disenfranchised, and what better method to usher in *good* people than the subtle blackmail of 'we know what you do, so please resign' to get rid of the *bad* people.

So, the call was made.

It was just another Holy Day at the Vatican. As the afternoon service ended, with their obligations fulfilled, the faithful swarmed out under the St. Peter's five grand portico doors towards the restaurants and pavement cafes that bordered the piazza.

In the sacristy Piero was seated in a gilded straight back chair, as the Pontiff changed from his golden robes to those of a common priest.

"Did you ever hear back from your sister?" The Pontiff asked, "The cardinal's plane came back yesterday without her."

"I have heard from her, Holiness, and this is the first opportunity I've had to talk to you. It would seem that depending on how we, Mother Church, feels about how the information was gathered. We have either an opportunity, or an obligation."

The oblique phrasing, suggesting more than confused thought, Piero went onto explain, the issue was not the collection of the information, nor was it what to do with it; to him that much was clear. But the lack of somewhere for his sister and her friend to stand safely, seemed to render any use of it impossible.

"They would like to visit the Vatican for an extended stay. Furthermore they could bring the offending material should they be invited."

The Pontiff thought for a moment. "Please summon these seven Cardinals to a conference to discuss the issues and any possible dissent?"

"Only seven, your Holiness? Forgive me, but is such a small number wise?"

"Did you know, Piero, that in 1277 only seven *cardinals* participated in the conclave that elected John XXI? I do not think, nor is there time, to listen and argue with the full College of over one hundred opinions."

The online meeting was held at a time suitable for such an international event and the subjects discussed were wide ranging and bordered on the terrifying. Seven scarlet-garbed holy men featured in panels on the wall-sized screen, in the Papal palace's media room - the one where priests reviewed and passed judgment on the acceptability of Hollywood's finest productions. After the Pontiff called the group to order, he threw it open to the floor and one by one, controlled by a green light, indicating that they had the floor for three minutes, the Cardinals spoke. One wanted to use the information to reign in Israel's building in the Settlements, another wished China to submit to the rule of the Church. A South American wanted birth control outlawed throughout the world. It was mooted that Ireland be reunited and the two Korea's rejoined. Such comments were thanked for, to be put aside for later consideration. Full agreement only came when it was proposed that America open its southern border and the EU close its, to the Middle East.

No such equanimity was apparent on the Oval Offices' closed circuit multi-screen TV. The President, the Attorney General, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, the head of the FBI and Richard Dauber all spoke over each other, until the President raised his voice.

"Thank you all for joining me again. Now that we know that the threats to our infrastructure are not real, we can now focus on what is real."

And now in control, in a very Churchill-like move, he

looked over his glasses at the other people at the meeting and then spoke again. "So, Richard please bring us up to date."

"Well, Mr. President, our friends across the pond have been having fun and games down in the Caribbean, with who looks like the mastermind of the theft - a police sergeant named Collin Braithwaite. The Brits tracked him down after he'd received proceeds from a very large Bitcoin sale. When they checked into what they thought was money laundering, it lead them to his partner in the UK who had our PLOT list on his cloud storage."

"PLOT list?"

"Preferred List Of Targets, Mr. President."

"So our friends at ZEN can still be our friends? Is it possible that this de Courcey guy and his girl friend are just having an affair and have run off together? Wouldn't be the first time - remember Margaret Trudeau and Paul McCartney."

"I'm not sure that it was, with Paul McCartney, Mr. President. But anyway, ZEN were the only people, other than our own staff to have access."

"So where's Sergeant Braithwaite now?"

"That's an awkward part. He's in the Bridgetown morgue. It looks like it was a hit and run."

"A genuine one?"

"It would seem so, but the Brits are still checking."

"So, we just have his partner?"

"Yes. Well at the moment."

The President thought for a moment and he glanced down at a text that had just come in.

"Isn't the LobbyShop somewhere in the Caribbean?"

"Yes it is."

"Any connection?"

"Not that anyone can establish Mr. President."

The president looked at each participants face to see

if any reacted to the mention of LobbyShop.

None did.

At this question, as this was now resembling more of a tennis match than a meeting, the Attorney General, the Ambassador and the head of the FBI asked to be excused and their connections were terminated.

Now one on one with Colonel Dauber, the president then brought up the government connection.

"I spoke to Maria Diaz today, Dick, and she called her sister who categorically denied that de Courcey would have been involved. But then she called back to admit that she'd had a company plane collect him and his 'daughter' from Southern California and flown down to the Caribbean."

"To which island, Mr. President?"

"To Barbados, Dick. Where LobbyShop is centered and where Braithwaite was killed. So, tell me again that ZEN is not connected?"

"It would seem Mr. President that you should be briefing me."

He ignored the reference to ZEN, and it was noticed.

"I have contacts too, Dick, but you are doing a fine job. No. A great job, confirming what I knew."

No mention was made of the thumb drive with his name on it, that had been discovered at LobbyShop, and no mention that the President had been advised of its existence by MI6.

The President closed the session with, "I think that covers everything for the moment Dick. Let's talk again when we have something new to discuss."

None who had participated in the sham of a meeting felt comforted by what they had heard; why in God's name would a Democratic President continue to act in such a cavalier manner? Even the grandfather of subversion, Richard Nixon, would have thought twice about throwing

the world out of balance in such a cavalier way. Did he really believe that to have dirt on people could or would leverage them into a socialist world?

It was Colonel Dauber, who had seen men die or be maimed in battle, who left the electronic gathering most concerned. He knew that the seeds of chaos that they had planted could reap the whirl wind. And he would have to somehow stop any implementation of the plan and recapture any data that had been captured. He needed to know what else the President knew, that he and the others did not. And how did this, what was now becoming more confusing on a daily basis, all fit together? No one other than the President had mentioned LobbyShop yet, and that was the obvious Caribbean connection. And, if LobbyShop was involved, which other state actors had their fingers in this pie? And why had Don been left out of the meeting? Was ZEN involved, and was this information being held from him?

As Richard Dauber's mind switched to the Caribbean, Anna and Roger were organizing their escape from it. Perhaps it was time for him to personally take a look at LobbyShop and to personally interview the husband and wife team from the North of England that ran it.

Chapter XVII

LobbyShop

The CIA dossier, in part, reads, "The LobbyShop is run by Lev Oblomov. Oblomov left East Germany, where it is surmised that he worked for the STASI, on November 9, 1989; the day that the Berlin Wall came down. He sauntered

into West Germany and into what he considered a brighter future. In 2002, following some mild success after a couple of failed businesses, he set up LobbyShop. From the day he registered his company name, he has been on the radar of the security services of over one hundred countries. To date, none have worked out the coded email and texts that he receives from around the world, but they strongly suggest that he is influencing politics from Azerbaijan to Zambia. He is not registered in any country, as a lobbyist for a foreign power, and he based his company in Barbados because of what he calls 'the sunshine,' which is, in reality, the internationally untouchable Caribbean. His tax returns show him to be wealthy, with an income in millions, and, if the income disclosed is correct, he pays his taxes when they are due."

The only issue is, they were wrong.

The reality was simpler.

Lev Oblomov was born in the Black Sea port of Odessa in the Ukraine, in 1954. He spent his early years as a drifter and with little education, but a lot of drive and moved to East Berlin around 1980. There he developed a love of the finer things in life when he apprenticed with a jeweler in Friedrichshein. And, when the Wall came down, he was one of the first to cross into freedom, and, via Hamburg, he found his way to the UK. He was, he thought, prepared for change; he loved the West, having grown up listening to bootleg Beatles tapes, but not for the struggle to make good. Unemployed and hungry, he tried selling cheap jewelry bought from wholesalers, to stores, but the venture failed because of the quality of the goods.

He then had a brainwave.

Luxury goods to the wealthy delivered to where they stayed while on holiday; gifts for wives and girlfriends, or girls buying themselves presents while in a relaxed vacation mood.

He started LobbyShop. He spent his last few pounds on a good suit and visited the Dorchester and the Savoy to find that his concept, once accompanied by a promise of omission, was welcomed by the concierge; the man who had the power to influence guests more than any other.

And Lev was off to the races!

Within three years LobbyShop serviced guests at the world's most exclusive hotels. If the Mandarin in Zug had a client that wished to purchase a watch, and was known to only purchase the best, an email would be sent to the LobbyShop:

"HW/VCA 750, visage de perle immédiatement."

Lev's contacts would know that an 18k gold Harry Winston or Van Cleef & Arpels wrist watch, with a pearl face was needed, and a similar shorthand might be used for an Hermes bag, or a Chanel suit.

A coded email and text system was used to defeat commercial interference and hacking, and it worked well.

As his influence in the ultra-high end of the market became so pervasive and clients came to him direct and included Gulf Princes and South American Dictators, he moved to the level of handing them dedicated LobbyShop telephones.

Having been born in a coastal resort, Lev loved and appreciated hot weather. One visit to Barbados was sufficient to convince him to buy a property there, and, if his company was registered there, it would lend kudos to the operation and make the home and office costs deductible.

When initial suspicions were raised, because of his international dealings, Lev was interviewed by MI6, but, having lived in East Germany, he wasn't overly fond of interrogations, so he refused to answer questions, and what they found most infuriating was that he refused to disclose his client list to prove that he was legitimate.

And, that's when he became a person of interest to the global intelligence community.

The justice department tried to prosecute, but apart from not being able to show good cause, there was a personal jurisdiction issue: Lev never came to the US, so it was given to the CIA, and, on the off-chance that he involved the US in any of his dealings, the Department of Homeland Security had access to his file.

The campaign was intense, as the stakes were high: had he acted on behalf of foreign actors during the last US General Election? It was an open question that Congressional hearings had spent years on. Worse still, if he had influenced the election, who had it been for? Foreign actors? That would be bad. Or domestic actors? That could have been worse.

The CIA was convinced that the UK must get involved.

And that's why, Lev, the epitome of the self-made man, who kept himself to himself, was on the US list of people of interest, and his Holland Park, London and Bridgetown homes and offices were being raided by MI6.

And at the same time that MI6 were rifling through the guest suite closets at his West London house, and the glove box of his Bentley, in the property's underground garage, cryptographers were attempting to hack into his private intranet and the codes that were received.

The house seemed like a four-story museum to the investigators, who were more used to storming shady safe-houses, or trailing men in trench coats, through London's parks looking for dead letter boxes.

This was a different world.

A world of Louis XIV beds, Ormolu furniture and Aubusson tapestries, Khmer Buddha statues and Tang Dynasty pottery were both used and on display. Every new room they invaded and rifled through was as expensive and

as immaculate as the previous. No wonder the basement and lower floor windows were protected by movement sending lights and cameras and Banham bars.

Then they came to the room of rooms.

A walk-in in safe.

It took the operator of the thermal lance quite a while to cut through the concrete-lined steel door, but the effort was worth it. The first agent through the gap likened it to a Pharaoh's tomb; gold bullion was stacked against one wall and what looked like a Picasso, or possibly a Braque, and other Cubist paintings against another. A chest of drawers contained numbers of just about every valuable watch known to man. Loose diamonds in perspex cases, tiaras, bracelets and necklaces lived in their own velvet lined drawers and articles that the agents could not identify, but were obviously superbly valuable, covered velvet lined shelves.

The last item in the room was not looked at. It didn't seem that important among all the glitter and treasures, but it was the concertina folder that housed the payment receipts for the safe's exotic contents.

Whoops and cheers were heard up and down the house, as the agents recognized that they had struck the mother load of items both used for bribery and others accepted as illicit payment for services rendered. Their evidence bags were completely useless. Their secure services would have to be brought in for such a volume of goods.

The evidence was in - Lev Oblomov was now a wanted man.

Timing being everything, Lev was in Miami delivering a Faberge egg to a record producer. However, as ironic as life can be, the next day when he boarded the American Airlines plane to Bridgetown, he found himself in Business Class, sitting next to Richard Dauber.

Chapter XIII

All Roads...

Before Richard Dauber hitched a ride on a USAF jet to Miami, for his pre-Barbados meeting, with the local FBI office to discuss LobbyShop, he met Don McKesson at the cafe in the San Francisco tech start-up hub, of Jack London Square.

Between themselves, they formulated an ongoing plan that would form one of the greatest alliances the world had known, or lead to its ultimate, in diplomatic terms, destruction.

Adam Eisenberg was going to step in to save the US Government from an embarrassment that would undoubtedly bring down their administration. He would also stop the destruction of ZEN. He would go where it was said that all roads led to. He would go to Rome.

Adam welcomed the opportunity to take part in whatever rescue had been devised. The time spent in exile away from the company that he founded, and in particular from the day-to-day contact, which had been the greatest in years, had started to grate on him. His lack of availability to his fellow directors, the staff and the press had been excused away by the story that he and Anna had gone on a world cruise to rejuvenate his batteries that had been depleted by years of fourteen hour days. It was a case of, although I've really been fired, 'I'm going to spend more time with my family,' story, but this time it was believed to be true.

Arriving at Jack London Square, the three men opted to sit on a bench by the newly designed communal gardens.

"I understand that Anna is in Rome," started Don McKesson."

"Really? What's she doing there in August? She hates muggy heat and Rome is unbearable about now."

Adam completely missed any possible ulterior motive, for being told this, other than an update on her location.

"She's with Roger de Courcey," added Colonel Dauber.

"Who?"

"The man who she ran off with, after you had Amrit shot. First they went to the Caribbean and now Rome."

"Why are you telling me this? Is this some mental punishment that you've decided to meet out? It's not enough that she's left me; you have to tell me who with and give me her travel itinerary."

That's not quite it Adam. She's the one who stole VALHALLA. Well, together with Roger."

"So?"

"So, she, or Roger, or both, started the project without us. Without ZEN. And, with renegade hackers that are just about turning the world upside down."

"Why tell me? You know I'm no longer involved with her? I'm not responsible for her actions. Neither is ZEN. Why aren't you talking to this Roger de whatever?"

"We can't"

"Why not?"

"They're both in the Vatican, and we don't have any treaties with the Vatican. No one does, as far as exercising any authority, or sway goes."

"Then why tell me?"

"Because Roger," Colonel Dauber's tone hardened. "You're going to the Vatican. You're going to meet with

Anna, and you're going to meet with the Pope, and you're going to do whoever else it takes to get us out of the crap situation that the US finds itself in, because ZEN is responsible."

Adam thought for a moment. He caught snippets of a group of metro-sexual techies discussing the best time for their IPO, now that the investors' appetite for tech stocks had cooled, go into the cafe, before he refocused.

"How is ZEN involved?"

"It was while she was at ZEN that Anna stole a copy of the file."

Adam's eyes lit up briefly, as the penny dropped. "Do you think that the Vatican would try to hold the existence of the project over us, or be tempted to use the data that's been collected?"

Don was about to voice, "Do you think the Pope's Catholic?" Before he thought the better of it.

"Quite possible. But in a more positive scenario, he might, just might, be convinced by a grieving husband, that he should repatriate Anna, and her lover, back to the US and surrender their data.

"But I'm Jewish?"

"This Pope is very ecumenical."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means that he looks kindly on all faiths. Even on our Islamic brothers and sisters."

"What's my pretext for a visit, and how do I know that the Pope will see me?"

Colonel Dauber was becoming exasperated, and it showed itself with, "Good God Adam, of course he'll see you! You have as many followers as he does."

"And you're visiting your wife and her traveling companion," added Don.

"We suggest that you take the company's jet to Sardinia, hire a yacht in Cagliari and sale to Civitavecchia,

which is about 50 miles outside Rome. Today's Wednesday, so all in all, taking in the day's sail, you could be in Rome by Saturday/Sunday. What could be more natural than you wanting to see your wife, while you're sailing around Europe?"

"Don't you think that the Pope books his appointments many months ahead?"

"Sure, normally, but we understand that he has already welcomed Anna so, our bet is that he's waiting for us to call him. He just won't be expecting you to be the visitor," said Don, the strategist.

"And that, Adam, should give you and us an advantage. No diplomacy needed; just two leaders of global communities seeking to solve a problem," finished the military man.

Adam was told to go home and pack.

And Richard Dauber left for San Francisco International for Barbados, with a stopover in Miami.

Chapter XIX

Now Look What You've Done

The Royal Bajan Police force was decidedly unhappy. They had never lost an officer before. This was not Jamaica. Speightstown was not some lawless out-of-control drug gang and rock star town. This island's recording studios worked with the world's decent musicians, not the latest drug and alcohol crazed band looking for a place to make some music while running wild. This was the island that Prince Andrew nominated, as having the best pizza location

in the Caribbean.

As the investigation started in earnest the next morning, the first instruction given was to check the rental car companies for any reports of accidents. None having been reported, a physical check of the vehicles, starting at Speightstown, and working outwards, was ordered. Then, all locals' vehicles would be checked for, however unlikely, their involvement in the 'Hit and Rum', as it was known. A crime generally restricted to visitors.

But there were concerns as to why the top sergeant had been on the road, on foot and on his own, after dusk. Where was he going, and was he on a case? Unlikely, but he had been acting strange lately. He was still considered new to the island, so could he have been involved with the MI6 LobbyShop investigation? These were just some of the open questions, and, if it was murder, could only be answered by whoever struck him.

The LobbyShop scandal had the capability of tarnishing the reputation of one of the last pearls of the Caribbean. Possibly more so than, in the early 80's, when America used the island as a staging post for its assault on Grenada's brief and unspectacular dalliance with Communism. That was indeed a sad time for the peaceful island community, when, if the 82nd Airborne grunts weren't out shooting Communists, they were showing off on water-skis or getting drunk in the bars, swapping stories of how many kills they'd had that day.

When the idea that Collin Braithwaite might have been playing for another team was mooted, and possibly MI6 at that, his superiors reviewed his note books and case log. Although nothing of interest showed in his paperwork, his mobile phone was a different matter. A certain officer O'Hara had left a message asking for an urgent meeting, and the RBP had no officer O'Hara. And, why at Sandy Lane? Since when did the police budget stretch to the most

exclusive resort on the island? The island's CARICOM police liaison officer came up with the answer. O'Hara was MI6 and was indeed investigating the LobbyShop.

When the Chief of Police called her designated contact in MI6, to ask about the investigation, she was politely informed, 'What LobbyShop? And, it would be greatly appreciated by Her Majesty's Government if no more questions were asked. All and any files, with no copies to be kept locally, should be put in the diplomatic bag, for immediate delivery, to London. The death of sergeant Collin Braithwaite, as unfortunate as it was, is to be officially deemed an unfortunate accident. No other parties were involved, and the case was to be closed.'

That did not sit well with the island's most senior police officer.

The tenor of the call was reported to the Minister of Legal Affairs, who called an emergency meeting of the Cabinet.

"How dare they?" Called out the Minister of International Business and Industry.

"Do they think that we are still a colony?" Voiced the Prime Minister to his Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs."

"Quite so, Prime Minister, but there *are* some considerations," spoke up the Attorney General.

"Such as what, may I ask?" Not really wishing for an answer.

"One is that Sergeant Braithwaite had recently received an extremely large sum of money, claiming, in an interview with MI6 agents, that it was the proceeds of a personal bitcoin sale?"

"I see. And?"

"And," he continued, "A little bird tells me that you *might* be mentioned in the upcoming New Year's Honors List."

The Prime Minister thought for a moment. He considered that such a honor would be quite a prize for a humble servant of the people, who rose from the ranks from being a trade union leader in Northampton. And, of course, it would be a great honor for the whole island.

"I suppose," he started quietly, his voice strengthening as he continued, "Considering our historic ties, whatever help we could give our Mother Country, would only be of benefit to us in the long run."

The full Cabinet agreed, and the instructions were given, albeit reticently, for all departments to cooperate fully.

A hundred yards away from where the body of Collin Braithwaite lay, the voice was as sharp and cutting as her husband had ever heard: "You bloody fool George. I told you not to drive. Now look at what you've gone and done."

"It was only a deer," he said, hoping that his wife would believe him and stop talking.

"There aren't any deer on the island, and it was too large for a dog, and that doesn't leave many choices."

"OK. Alright, it was a man in an awful Hawaiian shirt," he said, "Obviously very intoxicated."

"You crazy bastard. You're going to prison, and I'm going back to the UK with nothing - not even a husband. The one time that we've had the possibility to get ahead, you've killed it. Probably literally."

"Let me think, Martha. No one was around, so no one saw us. I'll think of something." He slurred.

But the rum was still in his system, and he needed time to sober up. He'd seen the man's startled face just before he hit him and knew that there no good options. Going back to the scene of the accident; if the man lived, meant jail for driving drunk and going back, if the man died, would mean prison for manslaughter. Then again,

leaving the scene of the crime, whatever the man's condition was also not a good choice. So, as a default, he drove the half mile to their house and immediately garaged the Hummer.

There would be time enough the next morning to look at the damage.

George wasn't feeling too good the next morning. As the rum drained from his system, it left him feeling horribly hungover, and as the nightmare turned into reality and then panic, his wife picked up from where she had left off.

"Now, Mr. Just-One-More-Bloody-Rum, what do we do now?" His wife shouted, knowing full well just how rhetorical the question was.

"I won't know until I've looked at the Hummer," he responded weakly, as he went through to the kitchen to make coffee. "But one thing I do know is that there's no way that I can give myself up. I'd rather take my chances."

"What about Lev? He's warned you before about your drinking. If he finds out from the police that you've not only run someone down, but done so using the company car - that he's told you not to use while he's away - he's going to fire you. BUT if you tell him yourself, he might just be able to find a way to help. If he can't, with his connections, then no one can."

George thought for a moment. "I still need to think straight, and I still can't. That's the last time I drink rum."

How about the last time you drink anything?" Came the sarcastic observation. "You know that once you get in one of those moods, there's no stopping you."

"Later!" George said as he went outside to the garage to inspect the damage.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

There was no visible damage.

He must have glanced whatever he hit, at exactly the

right angle, without damage to the car. Could he just have caught him with the edge of the tire, as he followed the curve of the road?

"Who cares?" George thought, followed quickly by, "Thank you God!" Even though up to that point he'd not actually believed in God, and it was then that his wife came out crying tears of despair.

"You've really done it this time. You've gone and killed a policeman."

"What? Who did?" Asked a grateful George, who still couldn't believe his luck and was going over every inch of the hood down to front left fender from different angles.

Martha relayed the news she'd just heard on the radio. The body of a police sergeant was found in the bushes along the highway in the St. James district early this morning.

"Wasn't us," he said, followed quickly by, "Wasn't me, Martha. Look." And he pointed first at the vehicle's hood and then down at the bumper. "Nothing. No marks, no scuffing, just nothing. Funny though, I dreamt that I'd hit something on the way home from the bar last night. Quite panicked me, it did. That's why I needed to come out to see for myself."

"You always were a lucky bastard, George," said his wife, as she left in disgust to go back into the house, and as she walked, she said, "And they're treating the death as suspicious." Leaving the sentence hanging in the air; not caring whether he heard it or not.

Chapter XX

Sun and Games

When Colonel Richard Dauber had completed his meeting with the Secret Service agents in Miami, he was glad to finally be in his seat on the short flight to Barbados. As far as he could tell, the meeting had been completely unnecessary, what little information they had on the LobbyShop could easily have been delivered by email in a nano second and read and absorbed by him within seconds. What seemed more important to the Miami-based agents was to show him the sights.

And they did.

Starting in Coconut Grove for drinks, then off to Smith & Wollensky's for dinner, followed by a trip back to Coconut Grove for more drinks, at what they told him was 'the hottest and newest' night club. When midnight came, Dick Dauber had just about had it with the agents that didn't seem to know much, including when to stop having fun. He said goodnight, but doubted whether they'd heard him over the noise, or if they'd simply ignored him because they were just more interested in the cute college girls they'd been plying with drinks.

The next morning, as he relaxed in his seat waiting for takeoff, he reached to take a magazine from the seat-back in front of him, and his wrist caught the eye of the passenger directly across the aisle from where he sat in the first class cabin.

"That's a spectacular Rolex. If you don't mind me saying so?"

"No, thank you. Not at all. It was an anniversary present."

"You must have some wife. Do you know what you have on your wrist?"

"A Daytona?"

"No. Not a Daytona. It's an Albino Daytona. And possibly the one that Eric Clapton had once owned"

"So, you're a collector?"

"No, a dealer. But in other things also. Lev recognized a potential customer when he met one and was not one to let a moment of self-promotion pass. I was in Miami delivering a rare piece of Russian Imperial silver to a client. It had been a gift from the late Tsar to his wife just days before they were taken away."

"So, you thought that you would have a few days on the island to celebrate?" Suggested the colonel.

"No, I live on the island. I also have a house in London, but my company's head office is in Bridgetown."

"From your accent, I'd say that puts you quite a way from home in both places. I'd guess the Caucasus?"

"Very close." And Lev failed to qualify the exact place.

"How about you? A vacation?"

"A mix. Some work, in fact mainly work, but some play," truthfully answered Dauber.

"If you haven't visited before, you must allow me to show you around the island. Not just the Spago-style side, though of course, it has its place, but the real island of rotis and the pepperpot that is never cleaned and produces the food of the gods. Or, if you prefer, seafood that is minutes away from its life in the ocean, delivered to the kitchen still on the spear-tip - possibly washed down with chilled Dom Perignon?"

"He smiled, "And if you have an issue that needs sorting, I can introduce you to real *Obi* women that problem solve, and that don't need to rely on tricks with chicken blood to generate tourist dollars."

The colonel was partially charmed by the ease of the man who, if he was a spy, maintained his act most

convincingly. And, it had been fortunate that the department had been able to borrow such a watch at short notice. As it had, as anticipated by the department's psychology team, sufficiently impressed the target sufficiently to generate the offer of instant friendship.

"What business are you in?" Lev asked.

"Military supplies," came the half-honest reply.

"I could have almost guessed. You have the formality of an officer," the salesman replied, not knowing just how close he was to the truth.

The two men swapped tales about golf courses and cars, during the three hour flight. They'd both played Pebble at Carmel, but both preferred the St. Andrews Scottish, more natural style courses, for the challenge over the view. Both enjoyed English luxury cars. Dauber owned a '63 Alvis, Oblomov a 66 Bentley drop-head coupe. They exchanged business cards, as they parted at the airport, and Lev promised to call Dick at The Sandy Lane the next morning, with an offer of lunch.

Dauber, the strategist, was satisfied that the initial contact had been more than successfully made. His task now, was to work out how the jigsaw pieces of Anna, Roger, Braithwaite and Oblomov fit together, in time to predict, or possibly influence, what was to come next.

George was waiting, for Lev, in the newly washed Hummer, outside the VIP arrivals area.

"A good trip, boss?" He asked.

"Very. Though I missed the sunshine. As much as I enjoy going back to London, I'm thinking about shutting the London house down, and moving everything out here."

"You don't think you'll get island fever?"

"If I do, then Miami or even New York are close enough." He paused, "So, what excitement have I missed?"

It was a question that Lev always asked on his return,

but this time there was a real answer.

"A cop was killed, or died. It happened last night over in St. James. At first the police..." He started. But Lev said, cutting him off, "Tell me all about it in the morning, will you George? I had way too much fun at my client's house last night, so I'm going to retire early. I usually manage to catch a couple of hours sleep on the flight, but today it was just from Miami, and I sat next to a rather interesting American. He's some sort of a military contractor - as wealthy as they come - and we talked from take off to landing."

Lev partially slept, as the Hummer bumped its way past the sugar plantations to his beach front mansion in St Peter. Saying goodnight, he handed Dauber's card to George, with instructions to research the subject's family and financial standing, and to bring the report when he came over for breakfast around 10 am. George garaged the Hummer and drove home in his Moke.

While Richard Dauber had been traveling cross-country to the West Indies, the encrypted phone lines between Whitehall, the White House and Bridgetown had been ringing off the hook. The assassination of the Barbados police sergeant had been a worrying development, and the local police had been asked, and had reluctantly agreed, not to become involved, while an American agent carried out his own investigation on the island.

However, while the official investigation had stopped, that decision was poorly received, by the Speightstown police. They had lost a valued member of their force, and their top darts player, so they created their own informal investigative team.

And that's who the American colonel contacted on his arrival.

He learned how Collin's mobile phone had been tracked to Sandy Lane an hour or so before he died. It was

fortunate that an uncharacteristically slow night at the hotel terrace bar, because of a concert on the beach for the locals, allowed the CCTV to clearly show Collin having drinks with a man and a woman who looked like tourists. He had fallen asleep after they left, but, an hour or so later, an unsteady Collin could be seen walking away from the resort, heading north. Thirty minutes after Collin left, a white Hummer that had been in the parking lot, also headed north, and that had been followed by a rental car.

So, which one had struck Collin?

The island's DMV had identified the vehicles' registered owners. The owner of the only Hummer on the island had been overseas, and the rental driver was a guest of the Government. Driving license photos compared to the CCTV images revealed that Collin's guests were also Government guests, but the driver of the Hummer who had been seated across the terrace, was a resident, and seemingly had no connection to Collin.

Experience had taught Dauber's investigative mind that the answers to most problems lay in the close examination of the more minute details. So, when he was given access to the Braithwaite dossier, he focused on the insignificant break-in that had occurred a couple of nights before, and the fact that it was so close to where Collin's body was found. Looking at a map of the area, he wondered why the sergeant had, after a few too many drinks, walked almost a mile, and then, at the location of the break-in, had probably turned and started to walk back to where he'd left his car. Surely, Collin hadn't gone to revisit the scene of an average crime? Or, had he? And if he had, why? Was he there to pay someone off, or was he visiting an espionage drop, and the location just happened to have been recently robbed? After all, the large sum of money deposited into his account had to be for something. It had to be either for LobbyShop, a drug deal, or some other smuggling racket.

But then why get drunk before going to do whatever deal it was and why was he killed?

He didn't believe in coincidences.

He decided to interview the tourists that had been burgled.

Chapter XXI

Knock Knock: Who's there? It's Opportunity

As Richard Dauber edged around the side of the cottage, trying not to be noticed, he was seen by Roger's Rasta security man, who escorted him to the patio where Anna and Roger were just laying the table for breakfast.

"Is this the husband?" Asked Derek, with a slight sneer in his voice. "He seems a bit old for her, but I guess he's got plenty of money."

Anna laughed, "No, it's Dick Dauber, one of my husband's friends."

"In which case, I'll go back to my post, in case your husband is out there too," the slightly disappointed Rasta said.

"So this is the infamous Colonel Dauber?" Said Roger.

"And you must be the notorious Roger de Courcey?"

"At your service, sir. Or, at least I was. Join us for coffee, won't you?"

But the colonel was in no mood to socialize, especially when he was at a disadvantage, so he got straight to the point.

"We thought that you were with your brother in Rome. Now that I've found you, Anna, I have the authority

from the President," which he knew was not strictly true," To offer you a pass on your illicit activities, if you can promise to hand over the information that you've collected, and help us in an ongoing, but not unrelated matter."

Anna was speechless.

Roger looked at her and smiled, and when she failed to react, he touched her arm. "Do you really want to cooperate with the people that think it's OK to blackmail the world?" Roger asked.

Dauber had wanted to keep the conversation on a civilized footing, but he could see that with de Courcey involved, this was not going to be possible.

"Can you please ask Roger to leave us, so we may talk privately?"

"No," responded Roger before Anna could answer, adding, "You have no authority here. You can talk to both of us, or leave."

"Roger, perhaps you should leave this to Anna, as she's the one most at risk here. You're just an accessory, and you're from the UK, so apart from a slap on the wrist, we can only cancel your Green Card and send you home."

"He's right, Roger. I appreciate that you've tried to help, but if you want to stay you have to agree just to listen while I'm discussing this with Colonel Dauber." And the colonel took this as a sign that she was willing to compromise.

"Now wait a minute. This is bigger than you Anna. If you give in now, Amrit died for nothing, and the same stupid game continues. You don't see that all this is ZEN's fault. If corporations weren't allowed to run roughshod over the people, we wouldn't have such poor working conditions and so many poor. It wasn't just jobs going overseas that hurt the country. Corporations have waged war against the Government for decades. They've lobbied for the restriction and removal of the working class' hard won benefits.

They've killed off the power of the unions and have basically hog-tied the Government. They then swooped in, as the white nights, to fund Charter schools, build hospitals and toll-roads, and now the people see the Government, their Government, as enshrined in the Constitution of, by and for the people, as being outdated and irrelevant."

Anna didn't need to reply, as the colonel picked up the gauntlet. "That's a great speech de Courcey, but what did you ever do to benefit mankind? As far as I can see, you just float around taking your pleasure where you find it."

"You don't get it, Military Man. Freedom is the ability to think differently, without needing to act on it. Freedom isn't something that you take to a foreign land with a bayonet. The default state should be freedom. Freedom wasn't invented by America, nor was it instituted by the Civil War or the Civil Rights Act."

Richard Dauber had heard much of this before, from other radicals and anarchists, but to put Roger in his place would only defeat the day's objective. So, he took his case to Anna through Roger.

"OK Roger. If it makes you feel any better, the President now understands that the whole concept of VALHALLA was completely and utterly wrong. So you and Anna were right to try to stop it, but that's no reason to throw the baby out with the bath water."

Roger was not letting up. "That's fine for you to say now that the program has been nixed, but what about the corrupt banking system? Wells Fargo opened millions of new accounts for their existing customers, without their knowledge or consent, and no one gets jailed, and Wells Fargo runs an ad campaign claiming to have been reborn, like a bunch of born-again Christians."

"Fine, Roger, we all know that was wrong, but that's not my department."

"What is your department Dick? Shouldn't' securing

the banking system for the people that live in *your* homeland, come under the Department of Homeland Security?"

The colonel turned back to Anna.

"Let's go for a drive."

And Anna left without Roger, who, having enjoyed the opportunity of taking a high ranking Homeland Security officer to task, went to get a beer from the fridge to celebrate.

Anna and Colonel Dauber drove less than a mile and parked facing the ocean.

"How would you like all this back?" As he motioned to a super-yacht out at sea, the elongated bow rising and falling with the gentle motion of the waves, as it crossed in front of them.

"All what?"

"That out there. Your life of luxury."

"Thanks, but not as before. Not with Adam and what he's done to ZEN."

"That's what we thought. How would you like to run ZEN?"

"Where's the catch?"

"No catch. We just think that you might be the better person to run it. We have seen the charity work that you have personally organized. Running a foundation the size of ZEN's is no easy task, and Palo Alto's Eisenberg General Hospital would not have been built without your input. We also like your ethics. Adam accepted without question what we wanted ZEN to do. You, on the other hand, knew it was wrong. That makes either Adam a true patriot, following Government orders, or a power-crazy fool. With hindsight, and the President agrees, it's a case of the latter. And, as you two jointly hold the controlling interest of the voting stock, should Adam decide to stand down, you would naturally take over."

"And, just why would he abandon the company that he built?"

"Let's just assume, for the purposes of this conversation, that might happen. If he did, would you consider taking over?"

"Only if, and when, but there would have to be a damn good reason for him to decide to go."

This was proving to be a harder sell than he had thought. Anna didn't trust that there wasn't more to it. And then it came to him. To bring her into the fold, now was the time to mention the other little thing that she could do for them.

"OK, so you want proof of our intent." He used the word 'our' loosely. "To show that I'm being straight with you, how would you like to help us trap some bad guys?"

"I'm not sure about that, especially if it means coming back to the US without some form of immunity on paper."

"The work would be out here. Have you ever heard of LobbyShop?"

"No, what is it?"

"It's an organization based here on the island. The owner's cover is that he simply sells jewelry, art, homes, vintage cars and anything else that his exclusive clients are prepared to pay for. In reality, it's run by an international influence peddler, who can sway elections and organize coups."

"And?"

"We'd like you to continue your Mata Hari act. I was placed next to the owner when I flew in yesterday. He has no idea who I am, except that he thinks I'm wealthy. If I was to introduce you to him - he will know that you're not only one of the world's wealthiest women, but also that you have the ear of two billion people. I think the temptation will be too much for him not to bring up politics and how his

clients might pay to substantial sums to use ZEN."

"So I'd be the fly to catch the spider?"

"Pretty much, but then you go back to ZEN as chairman."

"Chairwoman," Anna corrected him, continuing, "and you still haven't told me how you'd deal with Adam."

Dauber thought for a moment, unsure how Anna would react to the news that Adam could be charged with Amrit's murder, so he glossed over the important part of what should have been in his response

"Chairwoman it is, and we'll discuss the Adam issue later. For now, I'd like you to agree to go to Rome in the morning, to convince the Pope not to use the data, that you've sent your brother, against the US."

"Why would I work for the Government when that's who I am fighting?" A confused Anna asked.

The colonel's response was simple. "Because your actions could result in World War III, that's why!"

Anna thought for a moment and then agreed.

The colonel went on to outline what she would say in the meeting, and what responses she would give to the obvious questions. No mention was made of the fact that Adam was already on his way to the Vatican, as the founder of ZEN, to show a united front.

After he'd finished, Anna took the conversation back to ZEN, and what she would do with it. She saw a different business model for ZEN. Her ZEN family could change the world. She imagined how two billion people, acting as one monolithic block, could influence just about every aspect of life. What international business could withstand a coordinated global boycott of its products? And what politician, government, parliament, or system of government, could treat their people badly, if the people could mobilize through a global social network." And, as she spoke, she realized that, perhaps the meetings in Rome

would be more interesting than both of them thought.

"If that's what you want to do, that's fine by me," the colonel said, realizing that the limb that he had walked out on had grown exponentially, but it made the offer too strong for Anna to refuse.

"Let's have the best breakfast on the island to seal the deal," and he walked across the road and bought two *rotis* and two fresh coconut drinks.

"First things first. Do you have a pen?" Anna asked, and she took the napkin that been wrapped around her *roti* and started to write on it. She then handed the napkin to the colonel. "Just to show me that this is all legitimate and above board, you won't mind signing this?"

Reading the napkin took just a few seconds, as did the deliberation whether or not to sign it. The colonel added his customary flourish of a signature and watched as Anna emailed an image of it to her ZEN email account and copying in another.

With both knowing that the account was under surveillance, Anna then said, "Now that's out of the way, what time's the plane?"

"Early tomorrow. We're on a military cargo plane to Miami, so we can keep the passenger manifest private, but then we'll go first class to Rome."

"When do I meet with the LobbyShop person?"

"Lunch time today and that will be even better than breakfast," he joked, "As it's at Sandy Lane, and lunch is on the guy we're after."

Anna asked the colonel to take her to Bridgetown to shop for an appropriate lunch outfit, saying that she'd meet at Sandy Lane around 1 pm.

She selected, and changed into a Christian Lacroix sundress at one of the upscale island boutiques and then sat people-watching from the terrace of a coffee bar, until it was time to take a taxi to lunch.

Lev Oblomov was not a man to hide his light under a bushel, and had consequently booked his regular table in the center of the Sandy Lane dining terrace. He knew the value of being seen with the right people, and Richard Dauber definitely fell into that category.

George had reported that Dauber's wife came from one of the Old Money families that, along with the Astors and the Cabots, were sufficiently connected to buy into every opportunity that came their way. Early investments in trapping, railways, steel, coal and oil had led to the founding of a brokerage and finance house that quietly generated the bulk of their massive wealth. Dick Dauber was a man to know.

Lev was already seated when his guests were brought over by the Maitre 'D.

"I brought along an old friend I bumped into. I hope you don't mind one more for lunch?"

"Not at all. Especially such a charming one," he said as he eyed Anna up and down, gauging the quality of her clothing and finding it quite passable. And, with a feeling that he knew her face from somewhere, his attitude changed to that of extremely pleased, as Anna was introduced. There was nothing quite like a money sandwich, he thought. Old money on his left, new money on his right, with him as the roast beef in the middle. He had wanted to pierce the select inner circle of tech's uber-wealthy, for well over a decade, and this was his chance.

He ordered a bottle of Krug to celebrate.

"So tell me," he started, "How did you two meet?" Assuming that this might have been something more than just an accidental meeting on the island for the couple.

Dauber spoke first, and he played along with any misconceptions that Lev might have been harboring.

"It's really quite a boring story. Anna and I worked

together on a number of ZEN projects involving information-gathering for Homeland Security."

And he waited for the reaction from Lev.

"A very worthwhile endeavor in these uncertain days," came the response. "Well, in America anyway. That sort of work wasn't so beneficial to the people when I lived in Eastern Europe."

The champagne arrived quickly, and, as it did, Lev recommended that they start with blinis and caviar.

"From the Caspian Sea of course. The only good thing to come out of the Soviet Union at the time," he joked, which was the only reference made to politics during their very fine lunch.

Colonel Dauber was not surprised that the topic of politics never came up, after he'd first mentioned data collection, as it would have been far too obvious. Instead, the topics were light, as they were comfortable. All three, being both cultured and well traveled, conversations about the ballet and theater, and the best hotels to stay in, occupied the time between the blinis and coffee.

"How does it feel to have the eyes and ears of two billion people?" Lev asked Anna, as the coffee arrived.

"It's not something that we really think about," she replied honestly. "I just think about the quality of the experience for our visitors."

"Aren't they really customers, more than visitors? After all, they pay by allowing you to access to their data, which you then sell on."

"That's true, but they know that. Everyone knows there's no such thing as a free lunch," she said with a disarming smile.

Lev smiled back.

"That makes us both traders."

The colonel stepped in.

"So Lev, what this free lunch going to cost Anna, or

me?"

"Let's just call this an exception to the free-lunch rule. Yesterday, I delivered a Faberge Easter Egg, a priceless gem, created for the Empress of Russia, to a rapper who just wanted to have it on his coffee table in the video promoting his next album. It would seem that a copy just would not do. So, my friends, spending a thousand or so on lunch, with such fine company is my pleasure. And who knows, one day you and I may trade."

The colonel wondered if this was what he'd been waiting for, but surely this would be too simple, and happening on their first meeting would be too fast and too obvious."

"In which case, Anna and I gracefully accept your free lunch. So how do you see us trading with you in future?"

"Whatever your taste is? Emeralds, Diamonds? Gold bullion? A Bugatti? Perhaps something more exotic? Whatever your pleasure is, consider it available."

Lev sat back in his chair, with a satisfied smile on his face. His pitch was always sharp, always good and always landed its prey.

"And, in return?" Was *the* question asked by the colonel. Now that the bait had been taken, he expected a full-throated explanation of how his clients' influence could be exerted.

Lev smiled. "Well, payment, of course!"

Anna saw the joke first and laughed.

"Well, what other payment could there be?" Asked Anna. She had understood from the moment that she sat down, that she was in for a sales pitch. Dauber had been off the mark if he, or anyone else for that matter, considered this man to be a facilitator of espionage. She instantly recognized a salesman when she saw one; after all, she'd married one of the best. Adam was one of the coldest. His

eyes never left the prize.

Richard Dauber was not so certain and needed to keep pressing.

"I was surprised to hear that MI6 raided your London house?" Dauber waited for a reaction.

"Yes, so was I. And I have no idea why. All I know is that it must be incredibly embarrassing for them. My art restorers have informed my solicitors that the repairs will cost a small fortune. Then there's the cruel damage to my Bentley, and I understand that some items removed cannot now be found, which will not amuse my insurance company. If only the investigators had looked in the one file that they ignored: the concertina file that contained all my receipts."

Then, after a pause, Lev continued, "It was obviously a case of mistaken identity."

At this point, Anna tapped the colonel's ankle with her foot.

"If we're to be on time to meet the Minister, we'll have to go."

Richard Dauber was just grateful for the excuse to leave.

Lev handed Anna his card, as she thanked him for such a gracious lunch, and the three agreed that, no doubt, as it was such a small island, they would meet again.

Lev ordered a Cognac and sat back in his chair, a satisfied man.

Anna could just about contain her laughter, as she and the colonel made their way back to their car.

"He's no spy. He's a salesman. A good one at that, and with expensive products, because he only deals with the best. I imagine though that, through some of his more dubious contacts, he could possibly arrange for things to happen to people, if that was what one was in the market for."

Dauber couldn't argue.

He'd not met the man before, and a file never painted a full picture, so the uncomfortable fact seemed to be that Anna was correct.

He dropped Anna off back at the cottage and then returned to his room to write up his notes.

Chapter XXII

A Tempestuous Holy See

The US ambassador to the Holy See had been enjoying a solo lunch in a trattoria just off the Piazza Navona when his cellphone rang.

"What? Now?" He asked in a more than exasperated voice. It's been a rather long morning, and I was looking forward to a relaxed meal"

The voice on the other end of the phone insisted.

"All right Piero. I'll be with you in half an hour."

The taxi ride to the Papal apartments was an uneasy one. The ambassador had known Piero for some years and appreciated his calm and levelheaded approach to the issues that arose between their respective responsibilities, but that was not the tone of voice that had just interrupted his meal. Piero had sounded distinctly aggravated and the last few times that he had been occasioned to be hauled over the coals, by the Pontiff's right-hand man, was because of scandals exposed in the US newspapers.

Escorted to the rooms by a Swiss Guard, as was the custom of the day, Piero greeted the ambassador from across the room where he was standing at the fireplace.

Crossing the room, he offered the ambassador a drink, which was gratefully accepted on the basis that if he,

the ambassador, was to take another verbal pounding, at least some of his senses would be dulled.

"John, What are we going to do about VALHALLA?"

"I'm not with you." The ambassador responded truthfully, which was as Piero had expected, because such a plan would have been for very few eyes.

"The plan to delve into everyone's dark little corners," answered the Papal assistant.

"You have to start again my friend. And, from the beginning, if you want a decent answer."

And Piero did just that.

He explained exactly how everyone, anyone of note, was to be at the mercy of whoever was to run and had started running the program.

The ambassador's face darkened as he listened. Then, as the scope and depth of VALHALLA was described, he helped himself, without asking, to another glass of Frascati.

"Surely you must realize how ridiculous what you've just said is? The ambassador said, concluding that the stupidity of the plan meant that it was a ruse, doubtless fake news, if he'd ever heard any.

But the relief did not last.

Piero opened the folder that he had been holding.

"Let me see now. How did little Antonia enjoy her first day at school?" He asked.

The ambassador winced and said, "I'm sorry, what name did you say?"

"Antonia. Your Roman daughter by your housekeeper."

There was no response, so another question followed.

"What about the stock in Nuovo Banco Ambrosiano, that is held in the name of your Liberian nominees? How's that doing?"

"What *are* you looking at, may I ask?"

"Of course," said Piero, as he passed the folder to the

ambassador. "You will have to excuse me, as I have to attend to another matter. Please help yourself to more wine, and, if you wish, please keep the dossier. I have copies. We can speak again later."

"Addio amico mio," responded the ambassador, hoping that he and Piero were still friends.

And the words were repeated as a response.

As the ambassador paged through the hundreds of names, he turned to the adendum to see a large number of the Church heirarchy, which had no accompanying data. A wave of relief washed over him as he recognised Msgr. Cavaliere Bianco listed as one of the most flamboyant offenders. Knowing White Knight to be Piero's Vatican soubriquet, the ambassador understood that he had been brought in, not as some form of whipping boy, but as an assist in finding a solution.

It was late afternoon when Dauber dropped Anna back at the cottage. Roger had been keeping company with a bottle of the island's best rum, while waiting to hear for her to return. As confident as he was of his ability to survive, he wondered if, when push came to shove, Anna might try to throw him under the bus. That not having happened, he was surprised and almost disappointed to hear that he'd not been so much as mentioned.

"So, I'm not even worth considering," he said as he picked up the bottle that had been screwed into the sand to keep it up right. "What did he promise you, or what did he promise not to do to you?"

Anna thought for a moment.

"That's not going to help either of us. Especially you!" she said as she looked at the now half-empty bottle.

"I forgot, you don't like people who drink."

"Only those who do so before noon." She tried to lighten him up, but missed the mark.

"Don't tell me that they said if you cooperate you can go back home and run ZEN. Please don't tell me that."

"Its not just like that."

"So what is it like? Do you really think that if you hand back what you stole from them, they will help you out of this mess, that they'll let you go? The only reason you haven't been arrested is because we're outside their jurisdiction."

"But they've changed their minds about VALHALLA, and, as I was the only person to stand up and say 'No,' they think, no they know, that I'm honorable."

"So it's a case of Emperor's New Clothes, is it? Jesus, you're being thick. That just means Dauber's improvising. Once they've got the data back, they'll arrest both of us, and then our plane will crash on our way back to the states, or we'll end up by the side of the road like Collin."

"So now you feel sorry for the blackmailer?"

"He didn't deserve to die. And remember Amrit - do you think he deserved to die?"

But Anna was not moved.

"But if the data is harmless, what does it matter - and anyway, they can't get the data back - well not completely."

"Why not?" And hearing this worried Roger. "Please don't tell me that you sent it to your brother? How did you do that?"

"How did I steal your stolen files? I told you I could hack - someone had to get us out of this mess. So I did something to protect us, and I trust my brother - so I bought some insurance. If we disappear, my brother will create hell"

""Nice reference, because that's where we're all headed."

"He paused. "You do know that your brother was on *the* list, don't you?"

"That's not true. There was no Montalbano

mentioned."

"That's because he's known as the White Knight."

Anna ignored the reference to her brother. Even though she remembered that when they played as children, Piero always wanted to be known as the White Knight, she knew that his name should not be on any list. She had met most of Piero's girlfriends, before he joined the Church, and they had all been beautiful. There was no way that his tastes would run to men, let alone boys.

Roger was getting annoyed at what he saw as her stupidity. "Why did you send the data if it was of no value?"

"Did you really think that I'm stupid enough to believe that the data was neutral? After your contact bailed, I looked at it and saw how horrendous it was. But I also recognized its potential value in getting us out of this mess."

"You didn't think that, now you've passed on the data, there's no way we can return it intact. And you've passed it to a God botherer, and a pervert."

"My family have been God botherers, as you call lit, for six centuries." She ignored the other reference

"That's even worse. Does Dauber know you sent the files?"

"I didn't mention it, but my guess is he knows, and that's why he wants us to go to Rome to meet with the Pope."

Roger was intrigued by this development.

"Why would the Pope want to meet with us, if he has the data?"

"Because I edited it. I rearranged the names against the data, so they no longer match, and when it came to the Church records, I deleted their content, just leaving the names. And that's why they want to meet."

Roger was now quite impressed. He'd almost lost that round, and had to change tack.

"How's he going to place you over Adam?"

Anna said nothing. Now, she couldn't care less about Adam. Not only had he tricked and lied, by omission, but he'd sold ZEN down the river. Sure, he gave huge amounts to charity, but the money had not been honestly earned, because no one knew ZEN was selling their data to the highest bidders. He may have education mixed with endearing street smarts, but he has no class and no real friends. Whenever Adam buys a company he always manages to insert a term or condition into the contract that could be argued afterwards to ZEN's benefit. And, when the acquired company argues Adam's thousand dollar an hour attorneys buries the other party in paperwork and costs until they simply give in. He would always be the boy in the hoodie who won the lottery. Living with him had taught her that his money didn't buy him class, only things, and he'd not only mocked her taste, but balked at her buying real art for their home and for the yacht. But the blind acceptance of VALHALA had been Adams's final act of classlessness. She had needed out for her own sanity. She didn't feel guiltily about using Roger; he had been necessary while they were on the run, and, deep down, he seemed as motivated by self-interest as Adam. Now she had the opportunity to run ZEN the way it should have been run from the start, and not just as a cash cow from advertising. She saw ZEN as a power for good, a refuge for the lonely, as well as a meeting place for friends. And, if she was right, the advertisers that she would attract, would offer real benefits to ZEN's world - and not just throw ads at people regardless of their interests. She saw too many sites that worked on 'you liked this so you'll like these other things.' She knew that the technology just wasn't clever enough to work out genuine likes and dislikes, and she despised the sites that used the terribly inaccurate algorithms that came up with sales ideas like, 'people that bought this bicycle, also bought this umbrella.' She considered Roger, in his own way, living in the past as he

did, almost as bad as Adam - not caring about the future. Amrit had cared, but he was gone. She suspected and hoped that even Colonel Dauber knew better, and had just came off the track while he was following orders. As a family man, he would understand. She just wanted the best for her two billions strong family.

Roger interrupted her internal dialogue.

"So tell me - what about Adam?"

"Roger, you just don't seem to get it. If I cared about Adam would I be here with you. No, don't get any ideas. What I mean is, would I be stuck here with you. Now that we've been found, I'll take over from here. Sending my brother the data has put me in the driving seat, and that's why the colonel, that you're so afraid of, signed a hand written note to the effect that I have been helping Homeland Security since all this started.

"First, he'll deny the note, and secondly what makes yo think that you can get the better of any of these people?"

Anna thought for minute and then decided to humor Roger.

"Firstly, I emailed an image of the signed note to myself and to two other people that I trust - and I know that my email is being monitored. And, secondly, what have you got, except a pending hangover? If you work with me, not against me, I can save you too. You just have to do what I tell you. And, the first step is that we're off to Rome in the morning, so I'd put that bottle down if I was you."

Roger was shocked and amused in equal measures. Not only had she done a deal, but she'd left him out in the cold. They had challenged the greatest democracy the world had ever known. He almost had to laugh at the concept of Anna as David challenging the Goliath of democracy, so perhaps it was time to put the rum down.

"How I do I feature in all this?" He asked.

"With some humility, if you want to survive. I know

that, out of the two of us, you're the better student of human nature, but I did the deal with Dauber for me alone, for a reason. He really dislikes you, and he'd not have even considered saving you, and that would have jeopardized me. So, just follow my lead, and I'll get you out of this when we reach the Vatican.

Roger said nothing.

He suspected that Anna had correctly guessed the course of events.

The US Ambassador to the Holy See had contacted the White House some hours before Richard Dauber landed in Barbados. The gist of the conversation had been uncomfortable for the President, who'd taken his call personally. How dare the US Government spy on the Church without keeping him informed? He had been unceremoniously hauled into a meeting with the Popes advisers, and shown items that he'd rather not discuss that, should a compromise not be reached, were to be exposed at a later date. He was calmed a little after the President explained that it had not been the US Government that had acted in such a way, but was a family member, an Italian national, historically connected to the Church itself and was close to being apprehended. Once captured, they would be delivered to the Vatican.

He put down the phone and waited for the storm to hit.

The ambassador was not told, on a 'need to know' basis, that the Church's negotiator was also on the Church's errant cleric's list.

Chapter XXIII
In Vino Veritas

Colonel Richard Dauber, the most senior officer in the Homeland Security Department of the United States, looked down at his notes, as he prepared to call the President to personally report his progress.

It was a call that he did not wish to make.

Instead, the number he dialed belonged to Don McKesson.

"Anna's email arrived awhile back. She's one smart cookie," said McKesson, before Dauber could speak, and there was humor in his voice.

"Yes, she is and there's a growing part of me that wishes that I had not talked down to her when we first met. She's a lot brighter than Adam, and I'm afraid she may be a lot smarter than we are."

Don thought for a moment about whether or not he was going to say what he wanted to say next. "I know that the email couldn't have been in exchange for sex, as you're not that kind of guy, but one day when this is all over you must tell me how she got the better of you?"

"I'll tell you now." And he explained how the cleric's data had been redacted before the file had been sent to her brother, and how that gave her a bargaining chip if we wanted her to work with us."

"But you promised her ZEN? And, the email will have been picked by the security services."

"Yes, and I know that I obviously can't deliver. Frankly, though, her plans for it aren't bad. Influence, trumping blackmail, is better than what we came up with."

Don decided that perhaps there was a way that ZEN could be delivered to Anna, but that would be for a later

conversation.

So, he changed the topic.

"You heard about the London Oblomov raid fuck-up?"

"Oblomov told me some of the details Don. Seems like it's going to blow someone's budget. They actually ripped open the seats in his Bentley?"

"When the idiots searched thoroughly, too bloody thoroughly, they found nothing incriminating, and it seems that they then got desperate and then angry. When they eventually came across the safe-room with the goods, they missed the box of receipts that cleared the man of smuggling. Everything had been purchased legally. Stupid buggers."

"What's your take on Lev, Dick?"

"I think he's clean. He's not who everyone thinks he is. In fact, there could come a time when we could use his *filofax*."

Both men were amused at the reference to the paper-based indispensable personal organizer that everyone had in the 80's and had been the forerunner to the electronic organizer.

"Those were the days, when we were the only ones with the high-tech gear," Don lamented.

"Anna figured him out first," offered the colonel. "It seems that she and Adam were constantly contacted by expert salesmen, offering the best and most expensive chachkas and toys. Even these modern sharks think that they're dealing with Randolph Hurst or the Getty. They don't realize that these rich-techies are the savviest buyers ever. They don't buy, they invest, and, unless its a shit-hot IPO, *they* choose their investments with extreme caution."

Don thought for moment.

"So, if the LobbyShop is clean, who killed our police sergeant?"

"As unlikely as the timing might be, it may well have been a genuine hit and run, and we'll leave that to the islands' finest to sort."

"When are you going to report in to the President, and when are you off to Rome?"

"Off tomorrow, early to Miami on a troop carrier that was on loan to CARICOM as part of a Grenadian exercise. Then overnight to Rome. As for calling the President..."

Dick Dauber paused.

Don was quiet for a moment.

"So don't call him. He only wants good news, and you don't have any, other than LobbyShop is a bust, and as it's an ongoing operation, just wait and call him when you have something positive to report."

Richard Dauber walked over to his hotel window to look down at the raucous laughter coming from the pool area, where a soap opera celebrity, and her entourage, were having fun.

"You're right, Don. Speak to you soon." And, he ended the call.

This was not a place to be alone, he thought to himself, as he looked down at the pool area bar and unexpectedly noticed Lev Oblomov on a bar stool.

"Still here?" The colonel asked as he approached.

"I'm just relaxing before going home. After the delightful lunch with Ms. Eisenberg, I got talking to some tourists and time just flew by. You know how it is when conversation is easy. Time just flies."

"It's been a while since I found that," replied the agency man. "But I know what you mean."

"I saw you from my room, so I thought I'd join you for a night cap. I'm off to Rome in the morning, so an early night is called for."

"I'm glad you did, because the more I think about our lunch the more uneasy I've become. For some time now, I've

had the feeling someone's been watching me. It was a familiar feeling where I came from. Even as a person of no importance, if the KGB weren't interested in me, the STASI was."

"I can't imagine living under such conditions," the colonel said somberly.

"Then you should start to, because that's what you're building in the West. And, the similarities to the Evil Empire won't stop there."

Lev was more than a little drunk, and the alcohol had lowered his power to edit his thoughts before voicing them. "Your standards have slipped. Nothing really works as it should, and it's beginning to remind me of home before the Wall came down. It's a case of all sizzle, no sausage."

"That's rather dramatic," the colonel responded defensively.

"Is it? Technology has a hold on the people in the West like the East's secret service could have only have dreamt of. And, the quality of your domestic, as well as imported commercial products, is simply appalling. They have no life span, and often don't work out of the box. Hedge trimmers malfunction, fridges leak - a mix of design and implementation incompetence. Simple things, like cell phone ear-buds curl up, taking minutes to untangle before being usable, cell phone signals disappear from street to street, autonomous vehicles fail to see white vans. And worse, updated technology products and technology updates are released with monotonous regularity. Does someone really need to change their thousand dollar phone every year? And, of course, software updates for the newer phones render previous models unreliable. Flat screen televisions change their technology every two years, which is just as well, as that seems to be their lifespan. Simple things that simply should work don't because no concern is given to quality over quantity. The West has broken its early

education system which was once the envy of the world. You have outsourced overseas your jobs and your souls. Your insurance companies cover knee and thigh surgeries, but not the stem cell treatments, which are both less injurious and more effective. Your infrastructure is crumbling and your cities are inundated by the homeless. The free food vans and soup kitchens that disappeared almost a century ago are back in business and needed more than ever. Your deficit grows to the detriment of your people, because you have created a dog-eat-dog world. And that, my friend, is because the business of America, nowadays, is simply business."

The colonel knew better. To him, America was, and still is the finest country that the world has ever seen.

"But, we are a democracy. And, that means that everything is possible for even the humblest born."

The barman, a tall Bajan in a crisp white shirt and trousers and a red sash, who'd been overhearing the conversation while drying glasses, looked at Colonel Dauber and shrugged.

Lev, unable to control himself, continued, "Surely you can't believe that? Once perhaps, but can't see that now your Western democracies are a sham. Do you really think that the billions spent to attract such a small percentage of voters is enough to support a healthy Democratic process? Ask your people their thoughts on inner city blight, potholed roads, cities full of homeless, millions of ill-educated undocumented immigrants living off the state? Ask them about bank bailouts, pesticides and pollution and then compare their response to what your democracies are delivering."

Lev took a breath and a sip of the mineral water, that he had switched to.

"Your democratic principles are reserved for corporations, which thanks to the internet, the 'internet of

things,' and lack of government oversight, constantly monitor your people. Sure, for now, its all for marketing purposes, but how long before it becomes for political leanings? I know that you have a file on me and my movements. Others also will have either their own files on me, or access to yours. I ask you, why is that, if I'm just a trader?"

But he left no pause for an answer.

"Because I know influential people, that's why, and someone in Washington, or London, or Paris, or Bonn, has joined the dots to show that I must be either a pawn or a threat."

"Why, on earth, did you invite me to lunch then?" The colonel asked.

"I knew when I met you on the plane that this had been, shall we say, arranged. You seemed civilized, and I too have access to research. I found that your family profile was also civilized, so why not see if there was any business to be done, while I was trying to clear my name. A good salesman is like a good investigator. They need to meet their potential customers face to face, and that's what we both were. Except I was buying what you knew about me, and you disclosed it for some champagne and caviar - quite cheaply I'd say. And maybe, just maybe, I sold you the truth. I have to admit though, I was surprised that Anna Eisenberg was involved. There again, I believe that was beneficial, as she is not a professional in your line of work, she could see that I wasn't just playing a game of cat and mouse with you. The truth is, I just don't have any political affiliations, leanings or influence. I feared them in the East and I dislike them in the West, and that is why I chose to set my business up here and London rather than in New York."

"So it wasn't for the sunshine and the beautiful people?" Joked Dauber.

Lev was glad for the lighthearted response, to his

diatribe on the society that the colonel had guarded for almost four decades.

Lev smiled as he answered.

"Not completely. But it helped. Now, even though I do not have an early flight, something tells me that I should go home, before I say something that I shouldn't."

Both men knew that it was too late for that, but Richard Dauber was not offended. Lev's attack was not totally without merit, and they parted amicably.

"Nothing personal, Dick, but please lose my business card," Lev said, as an afterthought, as he stood somewhat unsteadily to leave. But both men knew that would not be the case, as even though Lev was innocent, he might some day be useful.

Dauber waited at the bar, and downed a bottle of mineral water, before going to his over-air-conditioned suite, for some much needed sleep. It had been a very long day, and he'd had a few more drinks than he was used to. As he set his alarm and drew the blackout curtains, it crossed his mind that Lev had been useful in subjecting him to a preview of what was probably waiting for him in Rome. This time, though, the speaker would have a lot more heft, if lacking in moral authority, due to historic, recent and doubtless future indiscretions of his staff. But, as a US negotiator, he was going to have to find a way to reply in a manner that, while not convincing, at least gave a good showing.

The colonel, the high-tech princess and the freelance hacker all arrived promptly at 6 AM at Grantly Adams airport, to board the massive C-17 troop carrier. Once on board, Roger, who was suffering from a mother of a headache, having not put the rum bottle down until it was empty, was pleased to find himself seated away from Anna and her soldier. He was more than happy to have them talk,

as it meant that he would not have to answer any more stupid questions. After such a restless night, he needed a couple more hours sleep to feel more human, and he hoped he'd wake, having lost the taste of stale rum in his mouth.

He really hadn't wanted to join the party, but it had made sense to do so. He knew that, with the players as they were, the outcome of the trip was completely unpredictable, and he could well get caught up in the fallout of a major disaster for the US. The Catholic Church had not survived for two thousand years, without being able to keep a tight reign on whatever needed to be controlled. And, he knew that nothing, but nothing, would be out of bounds when it came to protecting itself. Religious they were, but as for being God-like, he was not so sure, as they were also of this world, as much as they were for promoting the next. He recalled a photo he'd seen in a Chicago newspaper taken during a Papal visit to the city, in the 1980's. It showed the then Vatican Bank President, Cardinal Marcinkus, with a cigar in his mouth, leaning on the side of the Papal limousine. With these thoughts in his mind, the drone of the propellers and the movement of the huge aircraft rocked him off to a much-needed sleep.

Chapter XXIV

A Mile High Club

When the plane landed at the Miami military base, the three were whisked away in a taxi to Miami international airport for the onward journey to Rome. Roger now had the distinct impression that, while he'd slept, the plan had been formulated without him. It had

been decided that although he was part of the group, he was not part of the decision process. And, that he would be called on when necessary - not before - and not after. He was supposed to simply have trust that they were going to secure his future, and from the emotional distance that she was showing towards him, that was no certainty.

They were checked in through the VIP lounge and seated on the plane, before anyone spoke. And, it was Roger who broke the ice.

"So, who are we meeting with first?" He asked.

"The US Ambassador," responded Colonel Dauber, who now, ironically seemed to be more friendly. Continuing, "He was on the list and was buttonholed by Anna's brother and instructed to sort this out, before it became a true international disaster."

Roger couldn't resist it. "You mean the world's not already an international disaster?"

His comment was ignored by Dauber, but not by Anna. "What do you want to be when you grow up Roger?"

"I just meant that perhaps we could achieve some good on this trip, perhaps make the world less of a disaster."

Anna felt like telling him that that was not the case, and that he was just being snarky, but their pre take-off drinks arrived, and Roger offered a toast to a successful trip and that relaxed her.

"I really hope that this works for us all," he said, as he raised his glass and the others followed.

"If we are careful and don't go in with too many demands, we could still save the situation," the colonel said, as he sipped his mimosa. We are in an unusual position, as we have the complete support of our government for a mission that is not a government one. Of course, I am only an observer, as will be the ambassador. You, Anna and Adam, on the other hand..."

Roger was surprised by the mention of Adam.

"Why would Adam be part of this? Hasn't he done enough harm? If, as you say VALHALLA has been withdrawn, *and* condemned, as a mistake, isn't he the worst person to be included in this little jaunt? He was a keen supporter of the whole fucking stupidity, so how the hell's he going to help?"

Anna spoke first, "It shows a united front."

Then Dauber took over, "It also gives us leverage. As I know Anna told you, the data sent to her brother contained only the names of the clergy, not the details that the church would like to keep quiet. So, if we need to..."

Roger finished the sentence, "Blackmail the Church. And, of course, our demands can't be seen to come from the US government. Which are to be what, by the way?" Roger added quickly.

Roger tilted his head, as he looked at Anna, as if the question was directed at her, but there was no reaction, so he continued, "But you also think that the Church has demands, and would be prepared to use the incriminating data if *they* are not met. So there is a Mexican Stand Off? Perhaps I can help?"

"Exactly how, asked the colonel?"

"I can't tell you. But I can say that I have the answer to your prayers. So just think if there's anything you'd like the Church to do for the US."

The colonel stifled a laugh.

"I think that it's time that you understood your position here Roger. You are inches away from life in prison. You stole, or at a minimum, handled top secret papers and triggered the largest manhunt in US history, and we're giving you a chance to fix it, as an alternative to spending the rest of your life in solitude in a high security prison. If you think that you have any control over what we going to try to negotiate, you're dreaming. Our ambassador is convinced that we're in for some sort of religious

Armageddon, and that we could have to cooperate with all sorts of demands from the Church - otherwise they'll let loose such a diplomatic storm on the US that will take decades to recover from. If you thought Watergate was bad, just wait till this news breaks.

He paused, to let some of his words sink in.

"So, if I was you, I'd just speak when I'm spoken to."

The second mimosa, combined with the change in air pressure, as the Airbus barreled down the runway into the air, all but cleared Roger's hangover, and he felt strong enough to finally mark the government man's card.

He spoke as quietly as the cabin noise would allow him to still be heard. "You come and knock on a door in a non-US territory and you take control of stopping a project that you were responsible for starting in the first place. So, Mr. Secret Service agent, who the hell do you think *you* are?" His voice raised at the end to the extent that a look of concern passed fleetingly across the stewardess' face.

The colonel raised his hand signaling to the stewardess that everything was under control, but she did not look convinced.

Roger continued, "You know nothing. The only person at risk here is the US ambassador and possibly not even him."

Anna, in an attempt to bring some peace to what was to be a long night flight, played along. "What do you think you can do and at what cost, Roger?"

"Let's see how things go for you and James Bond here, and then I'll give you a price." And he took out the ear plugs and sleep mask from his courtesy pack and set his seat into the sleeping position for the overnight flight to Europe.

Colonel Dauber was not used to being spoken to in a way that left him, without recourse, and it rankled him.

"Do you have any idea what he was talking about? Because if you do, now would be the time to explain," he

asked Anna, as he needed to know just whose side she was on.

"No, I really don't," she responded in a lie, and who now realized that once again she had possibly underestimated the size of the rabbit that de Courcey could pull out of his hat.

The colonel who's spent much of his career interrogating suspects could tell that, while Anna was not being totally honest, he was just not certain that she knew what was in Roger's mind, so he played along.

"He's a drunk, and if he's going to try to play with the US Government and the Vatican like he's in some sort of parlor game, he's a threat to this mission, and I'll have him dealt with."

Anna was unnerved by the implied threat.

"Like you did to Amrit and Braithwaite?"

"I had nothing to do with either of those accidents."

I wouldn't call being shot by a SWAT team an accident, and I suppose that Collin Braithwaite being struck by a car, as he's leaving our cottage, was just a coincidence?

Dauber couldn't admit that Adam had been responsible for Amrit's death, not yet anyway. That information could be useful, should Anna want to try to reconcile with him. As for Collin Braithwaite, he was in the dark as much as anyone was.

"I can put my hand on my heart when I say that I had nothing to do with either of those deaths and neither did my department."

"Military men have hearts?" She half joked in response.

"More than you think. I have witnessed terrible atrocities that war documentaries only touch on. If you knew what it took to keep this democracy, your democracy, alive you wouldn't sleep at night. Why do you think Presidents age so much in their first term and then so much

more if they survive a second?"

Now that he had relaxed, the alcohol at altitude was starting to loosen his tongue a little. "I love my country, but you should forget what you've read in the history books. Most of it was written by the winners. The truth is, America has not fundamentally changed since the War of Interdependence. It was founded by businessmen, not religions men. Others came for freedom of religion which really meant freedom from religion. Anyone coming here now needs to understand that America deals badly with the weak, and as a country, we're strong and used to getting what it wants. In the past, if we couldn't buy what we wanted, we simply took it. The film, 'The Alamo,' portrayed a gallant last stand by Bowie, against Mexican tyranny, but Texas was part of Mexico at the time and the Mexican government was simply enforcing what was theirs. It cost Mexico though, because the Americans living in Texas then successfully annexed Texas to America. When America wanted access to the Pacific Ocean to trade with Asia, and Mexico wouldn't sell California, America took it by force."

Anna thought for a moment.

"But this is the 21st century, and nations are expected to respect each other nation's freedoms. And, as America is still the strongest nation in the world, surely there's no need for such ferocity anymore?"

"You might think so, but many in Government feel that the best defense is a good offense, while we're still forging ahead, while fending off challenges. Every day brings new conflicts that have the possibility to escalate into a physical war or a trade war. And each, even if not developing fully, leave a societal scar. Wars like Korea and Vietnam are a blight on our society, decades after the event, and the Gulf wars have yet to fully come home to roost. I understand that it's just the cost of war - a cost of doing business if you like. North Korea and Vietnam are now two

of America's largest trading partners, and Texas is our oil and California our breadbasket that feeds the world."

He held up his glass, "The wine in our glasses is Californian, and its the best in the world."

He took a sip and continued.

"And while many try to move on, others have a need to build monuments to the events that should not be forgotten and relegated to the history books, because they need to remain open sores to strengthen our resolve. It doesn't matter that, as our society is such a multifaceted group, the monuments that are built are more of a commercial process than a heartfelt one, causing further societal rifts. Why, otherwise, would it take over a decade to build a World Trade Center monument site? Anyway, my point is, in the final analysis, and I know that it's a very over-used expression, *America is like a shark*, it has to keep moving forward, or the greatest experiment of democracy that the world has known, dies. That's why a strong military is needed, and I'm simply a cog in that military, but VALHALLA was to be a military program, and I now understand that, even for America, it was too extreme."

Anna was horrified at the simplistic way that she had just heard her adopted country described, and she knew from the politicians that she'd met, that this was a very minority view. She wanted to respond but couldn't. She knew that, if she did, it would ruin what little understanding she and the colonel had reached. She switched off her overhead light, laid back and tried to sleep.

Roger had also heard the glowing paean to commerce, and as hard as it was not to join in, he said nothing.

Chapter XXV

All Roads Lead to Rome

The flight from Miami to Rome had been uneventful, encountering little turbulence. That is, apart from the philosophical differences expressed by those occupying the first row of seats, in the first class cabin, that housed the party preparing to meet the spiritual leader of two billion souls. As the plane passed over the island of Corsica, the stewardesses drew back the window shades in preparation for serving breakfast, before the plane's final descent into Rome's *Fiumicino* airport.

It was a welcome interruption to Richard Dauber's erratic night's sleep.

"Ready to take on the world, are we colonel?" Asked Roger.

"...And the whole of the Vatican - Swiss guards included, if necessary," came the surprisingly jocular response from the man who'd slept so little.

"I'm glad that you're in a good mood, because you may need it. Now that we've all had a good night's sleep, do you want to share what you two have cooked up?"

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea," Anna chided him. "Diplomacy is not your strong suit, and that's what's called for, to make this trip a success."

Roger feigned being hurt by her comment.

"Just because I don't believe in your form of Democracy, doesn't mean that I've written off everything about it."

"So which bits are you OK with?" His partner in crime asked.

The colonel just sat back to let the two spar, waiting for an admission, or a piece of information that could be used, or for Anna, to bring the renegade back to the party.

"Very little that's man made. I love the open spaces, that is, while they last. I even like some American movies, but not many. But what I like best is the way the masses are kept down, so I can do what I want, without being hindered by too many smart and well financed, well-educated people. I like the poor people that are fed nothing but entertainment news, while trying to make it to the next paycheck. They're so easy to navigate through."

"What the hell makes you such a cynical bastard, Roger? Why don't you try to change the system by *working* to change the system?"

"I did. Once, but it was back in the UK. It was when I was young and innocent." Anna laughed, but he continued anyway.

"It was during time when I thought the world was more sane. Way before your time, back in the 70's, a UK politician wanting to be the Prime Minister said all the right things to us egalitarian folk. He was the leader of the Liberal Party, before the word became synonymous with today's left-leaning fascists. It was an open secret that he was gay, but no one really cared. When he spoke, it really sounded like he cared about people, about their lives, and what was happening to them, so I was going to vote for him. However, and here comes the kicker, some weeks before the election, the papers published the story that this great humanitarian had taken measures to have his ex boyfriend silenced, because the boyfriend, being aggrieved at how the politician had discarded him, had taken his story to the media. Fortunately, for the boyfriend, the assassin's gun jammed, but not before his dog was shot. A satirical London magazine's the week of the election ran with the cover, 'Vote For Me, Or I'll Shoot Your Dog'."

He paused for effect.

"I haven't voted since."

"Jesus, Roger. So that one swallow made your

Spring?" Dauber commented, as he could see that if Roger had held these sorts of views for over forty years, he was not about to switch now. Especially if he could bring down a government, maybe many governments.

After the Swallow and Spring expression was explained to Anna, she sat quietly, as breakfast was cleared and the plane was readying for its final approach.

Colonel Dauber grabbed his overnight bag and headed back to the bathroom, leaving Anna and Roger alone for the first time since Miami.

"So, Mr. Clever, what's your plan? You obviously know more than you're telling me, so what's next."

"I have no idea," answered Roger truthfully. "I just know that, as long as our military escort is kept guessing about what I know, we have a chance of coming out of this alive. If not, better off than when we started."

Anna wasn't so sure. Her one and only interview with Richard Dauber had not been that comforting. She knew that, whatever the White House ordered him to do, he would do without hesitation. There was also the variable of whether she, or the Church, was a greater priority to her brother. They had been as close as close could be growing up, but when he decided to go into a seminary, to join what he jokingly called the 'family business,' a rift had formed between them, to the point where, once inseparable, they now rarely spoke and had not met up in years. She had found his flamboyant life style confusing, for a supposed highly religious person, and possibly, she now knew why. He became absurdly pious when he donned a cassock, but when he was in his regular clothes - completely the opposite. She, on the other hand, thought herself consistent in her beliefs and attitude, whether she was in jeans and tee-shirt shopping at a farmer's market, or in a couture dress at the a San Francisco charity event. She would have to wait and see which Piero would be at their meeting.

Inside the terminal, the sweet and sticky air felt like home to Anna. She could hear the noise of the taxis jockeying for position outside and was glad to be back in the natural pandemonium that was Rome and away from the sanitized civilization that was San Jose.

The US Ambassador to the Holy See looked unusually flustered for a diplomat, as he greeted them in the VIP lounge.

"Am I glad that you could come over so soon," were his opening words, suggesting that the situation had accelerated.

As they rode in the embassy limousine to their hotel, Anna and Roger left it up to their government representative to explain what he knew about the situation. The ambassador confirmed that, unless an accommodation could be reached, it was indeed the Pope's intention, possibly encouraged by his assistant Piero, to flood the media with news of the American program. And, the ambassador suspected, that this would entail both, full disclosure of the supposed activities of Mother Church's employees, and, in his presence, for the files to be destroyed. The latter event being the reason why Roger, the hacker, was on the guest list.

He breathed a little easier when he was told that Anna was Piero's sister, but then he failed to understand why, in which case, she had been involved in the first place. As the jigsaw pieces were presented to him, omitting the piece that VALHALLA had initially been the President's plan, he had an aha moment.

"So," the ambassador began, "The idea is to trade 'not disclose' information. The Church forgets what it has seen, and the US, or should I say ZEN's agents, forget what they have collected.

"Almost," said the colonel, "This not about ZEN, because they are not involved, but about what Roger forgets

that he has collected.

"So where does Anna come in?" Asked the ambassador.

"Anna is our emissary if you like. Adam Eisenberg was also due to meet up with his wife, and to possibly offer the Pope, a voice on ZEN's social media platform, but that will no longer happen. But, Anna might, under the right circumstances, make the offer instead."

Both Anna and Roger looked like they wanted to comment upon hearing this, but Dauber gestured that they shouldn't.

"...To 'break bread' over the internet, as it were, with his followers," said the ambassador enthusiastically." A great opportunity to mingle ZEN's two billion community, with the Church's similar membership. And, I'm certain that there must be a fair amount of overlap."

"So who's in and when is the settlement conference?" Asked Roger abruptly.

"That's not quite the term we had in mind," replied the ambassador, with a similar and uncharacteristic abruptness. "We are waiting to hear when the Pope is available."

"Shouldn't just Anna meet with Piero, or do you need a witness?" Asked Roger.

"Does this man really have to be part of this?" Asked the ambassador, who was not used to such impertinence?

"I'm afraid so," answered Anna. "We need Roger, because he's the only person who can completely erase files."

"How do we know that he will do, as he's asked?" Asked the ambassador, having judged Roger's character to be less than reliable, and who was thinking of his own indiscretions that could be made public.

"Because I'm not a politician. I'm a man of my word," replied Roger, addressing the group.

Richard Dauber sighed, "I think that's enough conversation for now Mr. Ambassador. Just drop us off at our hotel and then arrange the meeting, for tonight, if you can. Let's just get this over with."

Piero Montalbano was just finishing his weekly appointment at the house on Via San Giovanni in Rome's LGBT district when the call came through from the ambassador.

"We have the Internet People in town for the meeting, and, if possible, they would like to meet this evening?"

The cleric thought for a moment.

"Yes, that will be fine. His Holiness is out at a dinner tonight, so please bring everybody over to the Papal Apartments at 7 p.m."

"His holiness does not wish to be present?"

"No, he has requested that I deal with the situation. And, before you ask, yes, I have his authority to act for the Church."

As the call ended, the ambassador was uncertain whether the Pope not being present signified that his agent would be able to agree terms, or whether it would be a case of having to refer the issue upstairs. Was he to be negotiating the price of the car with just the salesman, and the manager needing to give it his final blessing? Either way though, he reasoned, it got the ball rolling.

The Montalbano family had been close to the Holy See since the fifteenth century. Related to the House of Savoy, their influence had survived centuries of internecine strife, corruption and scandal and it still held. The family had assisted Pope John Paul in seeming more a man of the people, and had thoroughly endorsed Pope Benedict's contemplation of resignation, when he feared the dam of

scandals was about to break.

Piero Montalbano, as an informal *consigliere*, had inherited the family's survivalist traits and was able to move freely throughout Rome, in many guises. During the day, a more pious man could not be found, but at night, he could be found in the company of the young and beautiful, who, racing their Ferraris late at night along the various city *corsas* would not have been out of place in a Fellini movie. Some afternoons, again while not in his clerical collar, he could be seen at the *Capannelle* Racecourse. Always impeccably dressed in a cream Cerruti suit and straw boater, he was understood to have introduced Prada slippers, or *pantofole*, to the Vatican. Once a week, he visited the area known as Gay Street. No one knew which houses, but there had been, in some circles, grave doubt that he was on a mission to save souls.

That evening, with the overseas guests in town, his important mission was to save the Church. Or, at the very least, to save its reputation. Yet another release of scandals, involving the names he had been shown, if true, could be catastrophic. Like many others in the Curia, he knew that there were many bad apples in the barrel, and there had been down the ages, but he had never himself come across such activities that had seen the light of day over the last decade or so. The accusations never seemed to stop, and the way that the guilty had been moved from diocese to diocese, from school to school, or simply promoted, made him distinctly uneasy. And now, this damning list that he had been presented with, had put him in a position of having to negotiate the information on the corrupt clerics be kept from the world, in exchange for the Church not disclosing the information that it had on the world's corrupt leaders.

An unusual case of trading an evil for an evil.

What would Jesus do? He wondered.

And then he found himself, accusing himself of

blasphemy, to even ask such a question.

As an alternative to divine guidance, he had also spoken to Anna. Always levelheaded, his often in the clouds, or higher, she had proffered much advice.

After wrestling with his conscience, having consulted with the Holy Father, and making penance for threatening the ambassador, an act that he could neither reconcile with his personality, nor his previous spotless character, he decided that the best course of events was to play it by ear.

Chapter XXVI

The Unraveling

Someone once said, a week can be a long time in politics, but it is understood that, in espionage, so can overnight, and that 's exactly what had happened when Colonel Dauber's phone had rung in his room at Sandy Lane, in the middle of the night. He may have followed Don McKesson's advice to brief the President as and when there was something of value to report, but he hadn't counted on being on the receiving end of a call.

There was no, 'Did I wake you,' or 'I know this is late, but...'

The President just launched into conversation, as if it was a standard time to call.

"I was watching fake news on CNN when I saw something that might be of interest to the case that you're working on, Dick. Did you know that another Catholic Church scandal has just broken? This time it's in Germany, and I thought that you should know."

"Thank you Mr. President," a tired Dauber responded

though he wanted so reply, 'so what?'

"I hear that you found our runaways, but instead of arresting them, you decided to take them to the Vatican to negotiate. Is that the case, Dick?"

"Yes Mr. President."

Colonel Dauber was jarred awake thanks to being told that he was also being monitored. But there was more to come.

"We've had a bit of luck too, Dick. Our cousins across the pond tell me that they successfully accessed the Vatican servers and found the files that the Eisenberg woman sent them. The Brits used some activist broad who spends her life in a pizza bar in the East End, wherever that is, and she copied what they have. And d'you know what, Dick?"

"No sir."

"The files are all fake."

"How do we know that Mr. President?"

"Did you know they had a file on me, Dick?"

"No sir. I did not"

"Well they did, and the information in it is all wrong, Dick. It claims that in the eighties, while I was a governor of some southern state, I was in a corrupt land deal that went wrong, and that my foundation trades in nuclear fuel, or something like that. Isn't that crazy, Dick?"

"Yes sir." He answered, but his mind was doing somersaults. What if all the data was fake? What exactly would that mean for negotiations? Should they even go to Rome? If this was true, and the data was inaccurate, had a crime actually been committed? Sure, Anna had distributed the outline of VALHALLA, but, as the plan had been abandoned, and no one, but no one, was ever going to admit that such an idea had ever been suggested, let alone detailed, should the whole investigation be dropped?

The President continued, "Because of what we now know, you won't be seeing Adam in Rome"

"No, Mr. President?"

"We arrested him for complicity in the murder of ZEN's co-founder, Amrit Kahn. So, Dick, we can't tell if the Vatican information is wrong, but it probably is. So my question is, if they don't know that, should it stop us from trying to gain leverage? I promised my voters that I'd secure the Southern border, Dick, and the only way this is going to happen is if the Church tells its millions to stay put. After all suffering is good for the soul, isn't it, Dick?"

"I'm not sure Mr. President. If you say so."

"Yes I do, Dick. It was military school that made me a man, and let me tell you Dick, it was no picnic. I'd been forced to go by my father: 'Son it will make a man of you!' he'd said, and you know what Dick, it did. Because of the savage treatment I received, I fear nothing and nobody, and anyone that gets in my way, or in the way of America," he hurriedly added, "Better watch out. I fight to win, Dick. And I do what's needed to make that happen. As Sun Tzu wrote, *'The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin.'* Have you read the Art of War, Dick?" And, not waiting for an answer, he continued, "Of course you've read it, you're a soldier."

And, with that last comment still ringing in the colonel's ears, the President told him he was doing a great job, wished him a good flight and told him to 'knock 'em dead.'

The call did little to promote the few hours sleep that the colonel had wanted before his early flight, and what was left of the time that should have been spent sleeping was spent hypothesizing. He questioned why he was being spoon fed information by the President, when he was supposed to be in charge of sorting the problem? Just what was his game?

It seemed like just minutes had passed, when the

phone rang with his 5 am alarm call, and it was then that Roger's phone also rang.

"You clever bastard," said the female voice as Roger answered the call. "I don't know how you thought of it, but you may have gotten everyone off the hook."

The voice went on to explain how, with her blog not quite covering the lease on her Mercedes, she sometimes worked for the security services. Having hacked into the Vatican's servers at the CIA's request, she'd downloaded what she saw to be the changed and redacted versions of the data files.

Something puzzled her though.

A copy of the files had also been sent to an email address belonging to a New York businessman's charitable foundation. One that the FBI had been interested in for awhile. She wouldn't say who the businessman was, but she'd found it ironic.

Then she hung up.

Chapter XXVII

The Sins of the Fathers

The limousine ride to the Papal apartments was a short one. Even with the evening traffic, it took just twenty minutes before Anna and Roger were entering the elegant residence that wrapped around two sides of the third floor of the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City.

Had it been twenty years earlier, Roger would have been wearing the standard bulky wire set that now, thanks to WiFi, sat in his jacket buttonhole, and the wiring that would have almost filled Anna's handbag now sat

unobtrusively on its clasp. The conversation between Anna and Roger in the limousine had made the colonel nervous. As they passed the Coliseum, Roger had joked about Christians, gladiators and lions, and which were they that evening. And, what did the reference to Caligula, making his horse a God, mean? It was all far too cryptic, too relaxed and that probably meant Roger had something up his sleeve. But, all the colonel could do now, was to look and listen. Anything else was too late.

Anna's brother stood to greet them, as the Swiss Guard opened the double doors to introduce them to the plainly elegant suite of rooms. They were, as Roger had expected them to be, elegant and restrained. Gilt wood furniture, interspersed with life-size marble religious statues and many large gilded mirrors adorned the walls, and an immense carved marble fireplace graced the room. It reminded him of a Grand Canal Palazzo that he had weekended at, except, when peering through a door left ajar, he caught sight of the Papal throne and knew that he was not in the home of a mere nobleman, but the Prince of the Apostles.

What was not apparent was the state of the art recording room behind the two way mirror that would ensure that, if necessary, nothing could be misrepresented after the fact. The Church, having been under siege for well over a decade, not counting the previous two thousand years, very little was left to chance these days. The guests' chairs were fitted with biometric sensors, and Kirlian aura cameras picked up changes in aura and body heat. Lie-detector devices would have been used, if they could have been installed surreptitiously.

"Anna, dear sister, it has been too long," said the immaculately dressed cleric, as he nervously and unnecessarily smoothed down the vent in his perfectly aligned suit jacket; suggesting that the meeting was be

formal.

Anna said nothing, as she hugged him.

Piero gestured for them to sit on the sofas that flanked a large marble coffee table that had been staged with fresh flowers, a humidor and wine in an sterling silver ice bucket. Like an opening move in a chess game, Anna was invited to sit next to her brother, and Piero gestured for Roger to set on the opposing sofa. He was offered a glass of Frascati.

"I thought that as its a warm evening, a chilled white would suit, but we do have rum if you prefer," started Piero, causing Roger to wonder if their Caribbean visit had been as private as they had thought. Anna was not too surprised at her brother's comment. She had noticed Derrick's crucifix necklace and purposefully not mentioned what she had suspected to Roger.

"That Frascati looks excellent. From the Papal vineyard, if I'm not mistaken," countered Roger, showing that he too had done some homework.

"So," started Piero, moving his hands upwards to Heaven, as he had often seen the Pope do, "How can we help each other in these perilous times?" His tone was in as relaxed a voice as he could muster. His cream linen summer suit and his practiced angelic smile were quite disarming.

"I really think its a case of how can we help you," replied Roger, also in an open and friendly manner.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, cutting to the chase, we are prepared to provide you with the missing information on your errant clerics. They could then be dealt with by yourselves, without making it a public witch hunt. And then we would destroy our copies."

"In exchange for what may I ask?" Questioned Piero.

"What would you expect us to ask for? The Church recommending to its people below the US southern border,

that they stay in their countries and effect political change, instead of migrating north in the millions, or perhaps some other political sway to benefit a particular international policy or two? "

So much for the small talk, Anna thought. Neither she, nor those listening in, had expected de Courcey to be so forthcoming so soon, and they anxiously studied the cleric's delay in responding."

"What if I counter your kind offer with what we could do for you?"

"Go ahead," replied Roger, "I'm open to all suggestions."

"We could refrain from leaking the VALHALLA plan to the media and from including some of the more salacious data with the leak?"

This was what the ambassador feared. Having another twenty years or so before he was due to retire, he had no wish to find himself, unemployed, or worse, back in Washington working for a think-tank, or K Street shyster lobbyists.

"And," he continued, "Perhaps it is my turn to ask, why we should not simply release the data anyway? After all, what's another scandal for the Church, when they are now so common? Perhaps we should just get it over with and deal with the resultant fall out?" Offered the cleric, in the game of tit for tat.

Anna was shocked that her brother had been so blunt. She now understood how her family had been advisers to the Popes for centuries, and that Piero was just following in the family tradition.

But she was more surprised than shocked at what happened next.

The representatives of the Church and the State sat back and studied each other's faces.

The loudest sound in the room was that of a clock

ticking, and Anna was seriously worried that she'd miscalculated when she'd involved her brother.

As the clock chimed the half hour, filling the room with the music of the seventeenth century, Roger started to smile.

And then he laughed, then so did Piero, and then so did Anna.

Roger leaned forward and poured himself another glass of wine.

"Now that's out of the way, how can we work together? First, I must tell you that the data that you received on the public figures is valueless."

From what the colonel had just witnessed, while he was not sure of Roger's style of negotiating, perhaps he wasn't the idiot that he appeared to be. But, that said, the evening was far from over.

"I know there are inaccuracies in the data," said Piero, "As we have our own way of checking into such things. But we do know that all the contact information was correct, which suggests that you probably have real information on these people. And, the names of the clerics that you have sent us, include those who we already have in our own files. So you no doubt have real information on these also. So, how do we get around, what seems to be an impasse?"

Roger did not need to think before responding, "Its exactly what I said earlier. We will let you have the data on the clerics, without any strings."

The ambassador, in particular, did not enjoy hearing Roger make the no-strings-attached offer. Both he and the colonel understood that there was no script to follow, but even if there had been, this cowboy would not have stuck to it. Neither liked where this was going.

The colonel also wondered if, as Anna had been so quiet, whether she knew what their plan had been all along.

Roger continued, "We *would*, on humanitarian grounds, ask you to weed out your bad clerics and publicly prosecute them. We aren't asking for Salem-style witch trials, but something open and something sincere. And, if found guilty, these men and women have to be handed over to the authorities for prosecution."

"The Holy Father has already stated, that this is the course that he wishes us to take."

Piero looked puzzled, "And that's all you ask?"

"We have one final request," said Roger. "And it comes direct from the President of the United States. It is the most important request of all."

"What?" Voiced the colonel. "What the hell is he talking about? There was no request from the President."

The idea that the President had been in touch with Roger direct, quickly crossed the colonel's mind, as it was just as quickly dismissed. But what the hell was Roger up to? And, he was now perched on the edge of his seat, as he waited for the the meeting to go into freefall.

Instead of speaking, Roger stood, walked over to Piero, and blocking any successful camera angle, he reached into his pocket for a piece of paper, briefly showed it to Piero, saying, "The President would personally like you to do this," before depositing it back into his pocket.

Piero smiled.

It was now obvious to him that both sides were recording the event for possibly different reasons.

"I assume that both parties will destroy all and any files, and references that exist to this preposterous plan and its origination."

"Exactly," said Roger.

The ambassador and the colonel couldn't believe what they had just witnessed.

"What the fuck was that?" The ambassador voiced, as the colonel was still processing what he had just observed.

"I don't know. But I do know that we need to get to him before he disposes of that piece of paper."

Anna looked satisfied. She had obviously been part of the planned deception, but she had a question that she was reluctant to ask.

"Tell me, Piero. Why was your name on the list?"

"I wondered myself," he answered. "But then I realized that my work in the Gay District had been misunderstood. My duties there, no, my pleasure there, comes from looking after those dying from AIDS and not from personal peccadilloes. And, that's where my nick name, *Monsignor Cavaliere Bianco*, the White Knight, came from. It was not just because I wear a cream suit."

Anna laughed. "I knew there had to be another explanation. But that brings me, both personally and on behalf of ZEN, to ask if there's something that our organizations can do together. It is not often that massively influential organizations, such as ours, have the opportunity to combine for good. We see how the internet is going, and particularly social media such as ZEN. It is a swamp that houses and encourages the worst sentiments of mankind. I am talking about average, hard working people that are led astray by activities and subject matter that appeal to the baser instincts. Streaming channels that broadcast home videos of suicides, rapes and worse that would not have been out of place in Caligula's time."

"Dear sister, nothing would make me happier than to work together, and we will discuss this at length before you leave for America."

With the business at hand out of the way and able to relax, and with Roger as a spectator, Anna and Piero spent the rest of the evening catching up on old times, and while not dining on a fatted calf, nevertheless, the three enjoyed the finest that the Vatican could offer.

Relaxed is not a word that would have applied to Colonel Dauber or the ambassador, as they waited at back at the hotel. And, while Anna and Roger were at dinner, a reception committee was being organized to meet them back at the hotel. As they walked through the lobby, they were surrounded by four white-capped military policemen in full dress uniform. Colonel Dauber put down his coffee, and, with a look of exasperation on his face, walked over to the group.

"Roger de Courcey, I am arresting you on suspicion that you are working on behalf of a foreign power, namely the Vatican, while not being registered as a lobbyist."

He then turned to Anna.

"Anna Eisenberg, I am arresting you on suspicion that you have supplied information on members of Congress and others US citizens, to a foreign power, namely the Vatican."

Wanting to make a show of the arrest, the media had been invited and *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*, the International Herald Tribune, CNN and RAI photographers jockeyed for position, as they followed the flashing lights and blaring sirens, of the military police vehicles through, the all but deserted streets of Rome, to the US embassy on the *Palazzo Margherita*.

As the two prisoners were manhandled from their separate vans to the street, the press shouted questions and created a lightning storm, as the flash bulbs lit the ancient villa's entrance.

Once inside, with the required effect of the theatrical arrest over, the two subjects sat peacefully in the period furniture - to be expected in such a location as Rome's US Embassy.

In the excitement of the moment, the colonel had not noticed, or perhaps cared that his subjects were quite composed. Now sitting opposite them in what could be

taken for a convivial late night gathering after a pleasant evening at the theater, he asked,

"So what was on the piece of paper that you showed the Pope's man?"

"Have a Nice Day," responded Roger.

"It's time to wise up and drop the anarchist act, Roger. From now on, things can only get worse for you, so if I was you I'd cooperate and this is your last chance to start. I know that you are a British citizen, but you are also a registered alien in the US, and you are now on US soil. So, if you haven't thrown the paper away I want to see it, and I mean now."

"I told you what was on the paper," and he reached into the pocket that had before, contained the paper and handed over its contents.

Dauber's look of satisfaction turned to concern, as he read the simple words on the piece of now crumpled paper.

'HAVE A NICE DAY!' was written in capital letters.

He showed it to the ambassador, who, while not that interested in anything other than how to protect his position, good name and his wife from finding out about his extracurricular activities, simply sighed.

"Okay Roger, very funny. What does it mean?" Asked the colonel, ready to play the game.

"Just as it says," said Anna.

Roger took over the conversation. "And, as for arresting us, you've already given Anna a pass, not to mention ZEN. Or, have you forgotten the paper that she had you sign? You don't seem to grasp that Anna and I have saved the US Government from its own stupidity. Your military thought processes are too binary. You can't see the gray scale of expediency. Piero never wanted to expose the people on the list. Apart from the fact that many of the corrupt politicians and business people are connected to the Church, Piero understands the balance of the world. Expose

the wrong national leader, financier or business person, and it could have the domino effect of creating absolute chaos in world markets. As for arresting me, what are you going to charge me with? It should be you under arrest for kidnapping me!"

The colonel waited for Roger to calm down.

"And what about the unaltered original data files?" He asked.

"I'll destroy them, of course. I have no interest in doing what the US Government, in all its wisdom, was *going* to do. And I'm the only person who can destroy them, as I'm the only person who knows where they're stored."

Richard Dauber noisily pushed back his chair, as he stood up. His military face was stern and set as he spoke, "That's what we thought," and he paused, before continuing, as he left the room with Anna. "There is a military flight leaving for the US in three hours and you will be on it."

Roger started to object, but was ignored, and he knew better than to protest to the red caps who, after another thirty minutes of silence, marched him to the black SUV that was waiting for him in the compound's courtyard.

As the SUV traveled West along the *via da porta cavaleggeri*, Roger sat comfortably, but unnecessarily manacled to the rear seat arm rest. The colonel's tirade hadn't worried him in the slightest. He knew that the US could not afford to bring him to trial. Apart from the fact that he hadn't committed a crime, the Government would not want VALHALLA mentioned in open court. He also knew that Anna would speak up for him, as she had asked him, and he'd agreed, to take over Don McKesson's duties at ZEN.

He was reflecting on how he'd outsmarted Colonel Richard Dauber, and that he would have the last laugh if they really tried to prosecute him. He couldn't wait to start

building a new, and perhaps, more meaningful life when, as the SUV passed the Vatican's *Piazza di San Pietro*, the blast cratered the road and blew in nearby shops and restaurant windows. When the firefighters finally extinguished the blaze, the blackened tangled metal was unrecognizable, and the ashes of Roger's future were being blown by the wind...

The late edition of Rome's, *La Repubblica*, was the only news outlet that mentioned a gas-mains explosion just inside the Vatican City limits, that caused the death of two vacationing Americans. The fact that Vatican City has no gas service, only electricity, courtesy of the Bracciano aqueduct, went completely unnoticed, except for, a heavily-bandaged quarantined patient on the fourth floor of the Walter Reed Medical Center.

The electronic chart at the end of his bed read:

Dr. AMRIT KAHN

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